

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

- NUMBER ONE SUSPECT *by Richard Deming* 107

SHORT STORIES

- THE BIG BAJOUR *by Borden Deal* 2
- MURDER SMELLS LIKE A ROSE *by Albert Tuggle* 12
- THE VENGEANCE OF HENRY DOWD *by Bryce Walton* 22
- NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT *by Donald Honig* 40
- NO BUSINESS MAN *by Wenzell Brown* 50
- THOSE CUNNING FLORENTINES *by James Holding* 56
- PLAY A GAME OF DARTS *by Vickie Varnum* 68
- LEGACY IN FLAMES *by Carl Henry Rathjen* 72
- THE BOND *by Bob Bristow* 86
- EXIT LINE *by William Link & Richard Levinson* 98

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The Big

VANYA hurried down the side of the highway to the place where the trailer was parked. The trailer was pulled off the side of a road into a small clearing. When she stepped across the ditch, she saw Sandor lying on his back under the nearest tree. He had his fiddle in his hand, but he was not playing.

Vanya stopped to look at Sandor from a distance, before he should be aware of her presence. He was a Rom any gypsy girl could be proud of loving. He was tall, handsome, his black hair curled about his ears, and he played the fiddle as the old ones had played it. Vanya herself was small, dark, pretty; but she had never expected to capture such a Rom as this one. Watching him, she felt the old familiar stab of love and pride inside her.

She came on, then, and Sandor looked up to watch her approach.





He scowled, slightly, and she knew that he had planned the scowl for her appearance.

"Well, Vanya," he said. "Are you through dukkering? It was yesterday that I wanted to coor the

drom and get started traveling."

"We can travel tomorrow," Vanya said breathlessly. "Today is the day for telling fortunes."

"So how much money did you make?" Sandor said indifferently.

I am reliably informed by those who should know; that there is a popular slogan extant, "Save Your Confederate Money, The South Will Rise Again". The gypsies seem to doubt this . . . although others do not.

"None," she said. She saw the frown again between his black eyes and she hastened with the news. "But I've got a big bajoor."

Sandor sat up. Vanya watched him with pride and joy. For a year, now, they had been married and she had not had a big bajoor. Every good wife makes the big bajoor for her Romany husband. Without the big bajoor she was not a good wife; and for a year now Vanya had not found it.

"Boro Dad!" Sandor said, his voice tense with the excitement. "You don't mean to say. Who are we going to swindle?"

Vanya sat on the ground beside Sandor. She took off her kerchief and loosened her hair to cool the heat from her head. "There's an old gajo woman who lives up the road," she said. "Yesterday I stopped for a drink of water. She lives in a big house just on the edge of the town, a house that was painted twenty years ago. It has seventeen rooms and it sits on a very large lot. The old woman lives there alone."

"So?" Sandor said impatiently.

"So today I stopped again. Today I told her fortune. She believed the fortune, for more than an hour I had to tell her all the bad she has seen and all the good that she will see. She is a very lonely old lady."

"She's probably got next week's

grocery money," Sandor said. "This is a big bajoor?" But his eyes were sparkling with the excitement and the smile was in them that was not on his lips.

"I told her that I was a queen of the gypsies," Vanya said. "I told her I had the power to bless money in such a way that would keep it safe and increase it by as much again. The old gajo woman believed. I could tell that she believed."

Vanya turned to Sandor, put her hand on his arm. She squeezed the arm tightly. "She showed me the money, Sandor. She opened the trunk to show me this great bundle, wrapped in newspapers and tied with string. I told her I would prepare the magic and this afternoon I would bless the money for her, because she was a kind lady who gives a gypsy a drink of water."

Sandor grinned. He loved Vanya. But it is good for a man to be proud of his wife, too. He could hear himself now, telling the story of the big bajoor and how his lovely young wife had worked it.

"The old gypsy switch," he said.

Vanya nodded her head. "Yes," she said.

He frowned uncertainly. "Can you work it?" he said. "Have you ever tried?"

Vanya drew herself straight. "My

mother worked a great bajoor," she said. "Ten thousand dollars for my father. In one day."

He grinned ruefully. "Don't I know it? That's all I heard about when I set out to buy you from your father. It raised your price nearly out of my range."

She touched him again. "I will work the big bajoor," she said. "Or I will not come back."

She went then to prepare the meal. While she worked she sang, because she was so full of the happiness she had found today. She knew that her price had been high and she knew that Sandor loved her for he had paid a great deal of money for her. And until now she had made them only a living, nothing more.

They sat on the ground and ate companionably of the noon meal. They did not speak of the swindle again. After the meal would be soon enough. When the meal was finished, they went silently to work to prepare. Sandor helped her with the preparations. He drove into town and bought two reams of white paper and an ample supply of newspapers. They cut the white paper into dollar-sized pieces, stacking them carefully, Vanya measuring the stack from time to time with her hands.

"That's about the size of the bundle she had," she said at last.

"Then your daughters will be old maids," he said, laughing. "For no Romany will be able to afford them."

She laughed with him, tasting the sheer happiness in the sound of his voice, and together they wrapped the bundle in newspaper and tied it with the red string. She went into the trailer and changed into the dress with ampler folds, and put on the cloak over it. She wrapped up some of the left-over newspaper with a supply of the red string, and put the incense into a pocket of the dress.

She came outside again and picked up the bundle of blank paper wrapped in the newspaper and tied with the red string.

"Can you handle it all right?" Sandor said anxiously. "It's a pretty big bundle."

"I can handle it," she said confidently. She smiled at him and her hands moved quickly, concealing the bundle inside the voluminous dress. "See?"

"But the switch . . ."

She laughed. "Don't worry, Sandor," she said. "I can make the switch. I am the daughter of my mother, and I am Sandor's wife."

"I will be ready," he called after her as she started toward the road. "We will leave as soon as you return."

She tried not to hurry. But she

was anxious for the deed to be accomplished, to have it a fact of her life that she had made a bajoor bigger than her mother had ever done. There was the love of Sandor and the thirst for fame strong in her throat and both were urging her on in spite of the flutter of fear deep down in her stomach. Vanya was young, only twenty, and her mother had been already old when she had accomplished her great feat.

There was nothing to arouse her suspicions. Everything looked as it had this morning. She entered between the old broken concrete gateposts and went up the walk. She stopped on the porch and the door opened immediately without her knock.

She looked at the woman standing in the doorway. She was tall, spare, with a large nose. Her hair was white and once, you could tell, she had stood erectly. But now her shoulders were stooped.

"I have come," Vanya said in an impressive voice.

"I followed your instructions," the old lady said, her voice whispering. "You must bless my money. You must keep it safe."

"And double it," Vanya said.

"I don't care about doubling it," the old woman said. "But I must keep it, for if I don't I could never face my father again."

Vanya had started for the room where she had told the fortune this morning. Now she stopped, turned.

"Your father?" she said. "Is he . . . ?"

"He is dead," the old lady said. "If I lost the money I would even be afraid to die."

Vanya went on, followed by the old lady. She went into the room and looked about her. It was the same as this morning, cool, high-ceilinged, dusky with darkness from the thick drawn drapes in spite of the great sunlight outside. No preparation of the room would be necessary.

There was a chair before a table and the old lady had placed the bundle of money, wrapped in tattered newspaper, on the table.

"Sit in the chair," Vanya said.

The old lady sat down. Vanya lit the incense and placed it on the table. The fragrant sweet smoke billowed up into the room, making the old lady blink her eyes. Vanya spoke some words in Calo, the gypsy tongue, reverberating them with her diaphragm so that they echoed in the room.

"Now," she said. "Take this newspaper and this red string and wrap your money carefully. Tie it with many knots."

The old lady took the newspaper and string uncertainly, with trembling hands. "I have arthritis,"

she said. "You will have to wrap it and tie it."

Vanya drew back in horror. "No" she said. "I cannot touch the money. If I touched the money while I was blessing it, I would die."

She began chanting in Calo while the old lady began to prepare the bundle with the newspaper and the red string. She was slow and uncertain but Vanya pushed down the impatience that rose within her.

"You are so kind," the old lady said. "No one has been kind to me for so long. Nobody comes here any more, you know. People used to come here. Before the War Between The States they held great dances here. People still came in my father's time. But they don't come any more."

"When you are kind to a gypsy, great blessings come into your life," Vanya said. "For this reason I bless your money."

"I want to pay you, though," the old lady said. "I have five dollars right here to pay you with."

"I cannot take pay for the blessing of money," Vanya said. "This is a thing that gypsies do only for friends, and from a friend a gypsy cannot take money."

Vanya did not let herself think about the old woman and her loneliness and her money. She kept herself thinking about Sandor in-

stead, and how much more he would love her now, and be proud of her. The woman was a gajo, wasn't she?

At last she was finished. The bundle sat on the table in the gloominess of the room. The room was filled with incense now, making it hard to see, the incense overwhelming the mind as well as the senses.

"Now," Vanya said. "You must close your eyes, for no one may look upon the blessing. To look upon the blessing would strike your mind, for it is a terrible and a hurting thing."

She watched closely to see if the old lady obeyed her. The eyes were tightly closed, the hands held stiffly in the lap, clenched into fists.

Vanya began chanting in Calo. She started low and far away, began coming nearer and louder, her body beginning to thump and beat against the sound of the voice. Her legs jerked out from under her and she thumped to the floor, where she thrashed; uttering terrible cries. She inched her way toward the table, making the sounds and watching the old lady. Not once did she look toward the table as her hand took out the fake bundle and held it ready. The eyes were closed. Swiftly, soundlessly, she switched the bundle, keeping up the thump and bang of her body against the

floor while she edged away from the table. When she had reached her place, she began to let the terrible sounds subside, going gradually away into the distance until she lay silent.

At last she sat up and said, "You may open your eyes."

The old lady looked at her and Vanya stood up, wearily, making her face vacant and drawn.

"I have blessed the money," she said in a dull voice. "I have made it safe and it will double within three months. You must put it away into your keeping place and speak of it to no one. At the end of three months you may open it and see the increase my magic has brought you."

"Are you all right?" the old lady said, peering at her. "You look . . ."

"I must sleep for twenty-four hours," Vanya said in the weary voice. "Then I shall recover my strength. Gypsy magic is very strong. Remember. You must not look at the money. You must not speak of the money. Or the magic will be destroyed."

The old lady followed her as Vanya edged toward the door, anxious to be gone. "It worked all right?" she said anxiously. "It will be safe? My father gave the money to me, just like his father gave it to him."

"The magic worked," Vanya said. "I must go. I must sleep. I will be very ill, perhaps even die, if I do not sleep soon."

She got to the doorway, but the old lady was right behind her. The old lady put her hand on her arm. "You're sure it's all right?" she said.

"Of course it's all right," Vanya said, her voice cracking with the strain.

"Maybe we'd better look," the old lady said, her voice getting frenzied. She started toward the table where the package lay.

Vanya froze, watching her. Then her voice snaked out at her. "No," she said. "Not for three months."

The old lady turned to look at her and Vanya knew that she was suspicious now. It had risen up in her suddenly at the thought of the three months without seeing the money.

"I've got to be sure," the old lady said. "I don't care whether it doubles or not. That part doesn't matter. But it must be safe. I'll look. Then it'll be safe, even if it won't double . . ."

Already she was fumbling with the string. Vanya felt an impulse to flee. But she knew it would be wrong. That would certainly arouse the old lady. She stood with her hand on the doorknob, not knowing what to do, thinking, *I tried it*

too soon. I am too young for the big bajor.

The old lady's impatient hands ripped the newspaper and the white paper showed beneath. She looked toward Vanya, clutching a dollar-sized sheet of paper.

"What have you done with the money?" she screamed.

She came toward Vanya, almost running, clutching at her with both hands. Vanya, panicked, wheeled toward her, pushing her away, thinking now only of escape. She still had the money. If she could escape . . .

The old lady fell backward, clawing at the air. She made a strange cry when she landed on the floor, and there was in her an immediate limpness that frightened Vanya. She stood holding the door, looking down at the old woman, who lay twisted in a strangely familiar way.

At last Vanya left the door. She stood over the old lady, then she knelt down and put her hand on her face. "Mullah," she whispered. "Dead. Dead."

She squatted beside the old woman's body. It had been such a little push. But the old gajo woman had been so old. She knelt there, feeling the disaster that had come upon her in her youthful pride. She was no good for Sandor, no good for herself. She scarcely deserved

to be called by the name Romany.

After a time, how long she did not know, she began to think more calmly. She still had the money, didn't she? She could hide the other bundle, clear away the incense and the other signs of a gypsy presence, and go away. The old lady lived alone. When she was found everyone would assume that she had fallen. She *had* fallen. Vanya had given her only a little push.

Vanya cleared the table of the incense holder, looked about the room. She didn't know what to do with the fake bundle. She picked it up, then, and took it to the chest where the old lady had kept her money. She put the bundle inside the chest, under a quilt, and locked the chest door. Let her relatives figure out why the old lady kept a bundle of paper tied up in newspaper and red string.

She went to the door and looked out carefully. Nothing stirred. She walked out on the porch, turned once and waved back toward the house as though speaking farewell to the old lady, and then went casually toward the highway. She made herself go slowly down the highway until she had covered more than a mile. Then she began to hurry.

She would not tell Sandor. She would tell him only that the big

bajoor had worked, that she had the money. He need not know how she had failed. No one would ever know that the old lady had fallen.

When she arrived, Sandor was ready. She got into the car beside him and immediately Sandor pulled into the highway.

"Did you get it?" he said briefly.

"Yes," she said, taking the bundle out of the voluminous dress and putting it on the seat between them.

They drove for a long time. At first Vanya slept, for she was weary, but when she awoke they were very gay. They laughed and sang and Vanya was warm with his love and with the coming fame of the big bajoor when their people should be told the story.

They did not stop until daylight.

"Time for breakfast, little one," Sandor said tenderly. He put his hand on her head and tousled her gently. "But first . . . let's look at our fortune."

His lean strong fingers began to undo the red string. Vanya watched him, not looking down at the money but watching his face as he saw it for the first time. She saw the change in him and her mind could not understand it. At last he looked up at her and his voice was strange when he spoke.

"Well, little Vanya," he said. "We're rich now. We're rich—just

as soon as the Confederate States of America come back into power."

Vanya looked, then. She saw the bundle of carefully preserved Confederate bills, large and strange-looking, and she felt her soul curl inside her.

Sandor had never punished her, as gypsy men punish their wives. But she knew that he was going to do it now. Her mind revolted. She had killed the old woman and then the big bajoor had been a swindle on her instead. But her body did not move as she waited for Sandor to begin.

There was a silence. Then he opened the door of the car on his side. "Get out," he said. "Build a fire."

She got out of the car and went around to his side. She kept her eyes to the ground. He did not touch her.

"Build a fire," he repeated. "I want my breakfast, woman."

"Sandor," she said.

There was no pleading, no tears, in the voice.

"You are going to cook breakfast with the heat of your great bajoor," Sandor said above her.

She went away from him, began gathering the dry pine limbs. She moved numbly, as though she were an old woman. Sandor stood still, watching her as she knelt before the pile of sticks. He threw a match

at her feet. Dazed, she struck it.

"A bigger fire," Sandor said.

She piled on the limbs she had brought. With one foot he kicked the package of Confederate money near her. Her hands tore the bills out of the stacks. She stopped, then.

"I can't burn money," she said.
"Not even . . ."

"Burn it," he said.

She began putting the bills into the resin-hot fire. The flames licked at them, curling the edges, wispings them into ashes that preserved still the engraved pictures. She fed the fire steadily with the bills, her hands moving with a slow hurt that came from deep within her. It was a greater punishment than a beating from his broad leather belt.

Sandor went away, came back with the utensils for cooking. He dropped them by her side. "You have swindled me a great breakfast fire," he said. "See now if you remember how to cook my breakfast."

She put in the last handful of bills, scabbled in the old newspaper to see if there were more. She picked up the thin booklet that had lain under the bills, hidden by them, and looked at it stupidly. It fell open in her hands. She kept on looking at it, laughing, a laughing that sounded like crying.

Sandor came back to her side, his face angrier still. "What's the mat-

ter with you, stupid woman?" he said.

She looked up at him, for the first time. She thrust the booklet toward him. "Look," she said. "Look. Where she has made the mark with the pencil."

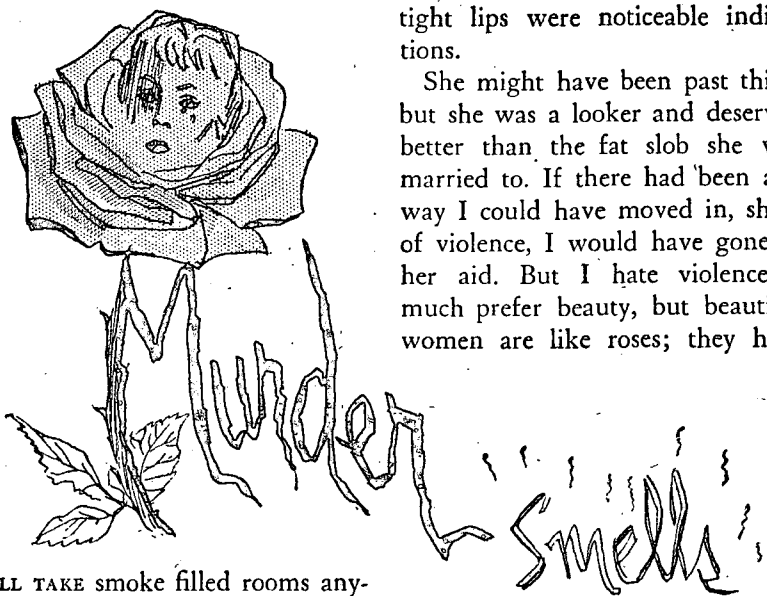
He looked. His face turned white. He stalked away from her toward the car. She looked at the booklet again, seeing where the old woman had marked the page.

"This money catalogue is old too," she called after him. "Yet here they are worth seventeen dollars a piece. Bodo Dad alone knows how much they are worth now."

He was gone into the trailer. She stood up shouting after him. "The father of the gajo woman was wise," she shouted after him. "He told the truth when he told her never to let it go. And you burned it. You burned my big bajoor. Seventeen dollars apiece!"

There was only silence. The anger and the weeping laughter left her. She squatted again beside the fire and looked into its red heart. She could still see the ashy outline of the last bill. She touched it with a stick and the ash crumbled so that it could not be distinguished from the rest.

She added the rare-money catalogue to the flames. Then she began cooking breakfast for her Romany man.



tight lips were noticeable indications.

She might have been past thirty but she was a looker and deserved better than the fat slob she was married to. If there had been any way I could have moved in, short of violence, I would have gone to her aid. But I hate violence. I much prefer beauty, but beautiful women are like roses; they have

I'LL TAKE smoke filled rooms anytime even though I abhor tobacco smoke—and smokers. I like the lonesomeness of crowded streets but deliver me from the wide open spaces. Open spaces can be too confining, especially when said spaces have jail doors that had nearly fenced me in.

So, I was taking the train east for my health and enjoying the scenery. Especially enjoyable was the woman one seat up and across the aisle. She and her husband were having a fight. Oh, they masked it well and to the uninterested, they were just two people riding on the train. But I was interested and I do have a practiced eye. Dirty looks, whispers and

thorns. That's why I'm still a bachelor after thirty-five years.

Removing his hat, fatty wiped the sweat from his bald head and the inside of his hat band as he looked my way. His shirt was plastered to him but she had that look of a fresh rose. No wonder I was tempted by her fragrance. *Ditch that pig*, I thought. *Maybe I'll help* . . . Plans are why Jack Barnes is still free to enjoy beautiful flowers—and go East. Also why the cops won't even figure how Big Ed was—practically jumped from a ten story window.

"Back there in Las Vegas," she spoke just loud enough for me to

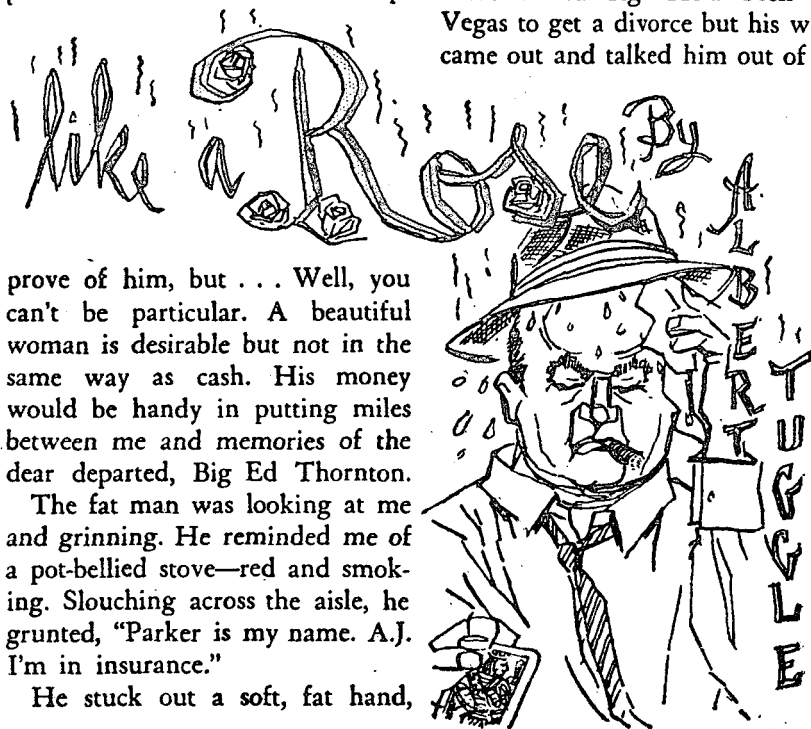
Never play cards with strangers, especially on a train, and more especially if a stranger is accompanied by a wife, who may not approve of cardplaying, her spouse, or you, in that order.

hear, "you trying to act so big just because you got that insurance settlement. Allen, you're just a cheap tinhorn with a bankroll!"

Snorting, he got up as if to leave and my plans took a turn. *A bankroll . . .* I'd misjudged the man. He wasn't a pig; he was a client, a potential customer. I didn't ap-

clammy with sweat. I knew his type and socially I wouldn't have taken his hand. His wife hadn't told him that he had B.O., flavored with the aroma of a smelly cigar. "I'm Jack Barnes," I said. "Glad to meet you." I was, but only in a professional way.

He talked big. He'd been to Vegas to get a divorce but his wife came out and talked him out of it.



prove of him, but . . . Well, you can't be particular. A beautiful woman is desirable but not in the same way as cash. His money would be handy in putting miles between me and memories of the dear departed, Big Ed Thornton.

The fat man was looking at me and grinning. He reminded me of a pot-bellied stove—red and smoking. Slouching across the aisle, he grunted, "Parker is my name. A.J. I'm in insurance."

He stuck out a soft, fat hand,

Wiping his face again, he blew smoke in mine. "Air conditioner must be on th' blink," he said. "Wish I had a drink."

I got out the fifth I keep for just such customers and he took a big gulp, as I said, "They ought to have a club car like Vegas."

He grinned toothily. "Amen, brother. But my wife hates clubs. Hates trains. Hates me, too."

Tinhorn . . . If his weakness was cards I'd have no trouble. You have to use imagination and never the same M.O. twice. And never violence—if there's a better way.

He was saying, "Speaking of insurance, I have a policy . . ."

"Let's talk about something interesting," I said, steering him in the way a client should go. "Take women, or cards . . . How about a little friendly stud?"

I could read his smirk. "Naw . . . Blackjack's my game."

Come into my parlor, I thought. Aloud I said, "Do you have a deck?"

"Naw . . . Get one from th' porter. How 'bout another snort? I'll buy at the first stop." Taking half a pint in one swallow, he handed me back the bottle. "Have one?"

"No thanks. Teetotaler. Just keep it for friends." I told the truth. "Matter of fact," I added, fanning his smoke away, "I don't

smoke either," and coughed.

"What kinda guy are you?" he frowned. "Don't you play with girls either?" He was trying to be funny.

"Look," I said, "women have their place—at the right time."

We got the porter to bring a deck, table and some cokes. His wife looked at me in a silent appeal. Then she said, "Mister—er, I wish you wouldn't. Allen, he . . ."

Parker was glowering. "Shut up, Gracie! Leave us alone!"

I don't like scenes and some of the passengers stared. One couple got up and moved to seats toward the front of the car. With hate and tears filling her eyes, Mrs. Parker said quietly, "You've all my money—our money, Allen." Then she sat back and faced the window. She would really be worth a try if I didn't believe in business first.

"Blackjack gets the deal," I said, "beats anything, even a twenty-one? Hit on your nerve—huh?"

"Suits me."

We started at a friendly dollar. He wasn't good but he was no stranger to a deck. His wife named it when she called him a *tinhorn*.

"Kinda outa practice, Barnes," he said. "What business you in?"

"Investments."

"Wanta hit?"

"Investments" were my line.

Most card games are alike on a train. Give and take and monotony. We kept our money inconspicuous and my seat was the last in the car, so little attention was paid to us. Thirty minutes later we were up to an unfriendly five and he was sweating and his cigar was soggy but he kept it fogging. His shirt was soaking wet. He kept taking off his panama and wiping his head with a soggy handkerchief.

Loser of ninety dollars, I figured the time was right. Besides, his B.O. was overpowering. "You're having all the luck," I complained. "How about making this one for twenty?"

"Coming at you." He flipped me a ten and a king. He turned up a blackjack.

I backed down to ten and won. I'd wait until I got the deal. His wife was almost asleep but kept fighting to keep a watch on us. If she was worrying about losing their train ticket, she needn't have. All I wanted was cash.

The porter came through hollering that lunch was being served up ahead and nearly everyone got up and stumbled toward the front. No one was left but Parker's wife and us, when Parker said, "Wonder if it's cool in the diner? I'm hot! How you keep so cool?"

I always feel cool; I like being

well groomed. Only a plug-ugly draws the critical eye of the gendarmes. The train was stopping as I bet ten and blackjacked. *Now*, I thought, *It's my turn*. Up in front, some workmen were piling something in the vestibule and banging tools as he bet five.

"Look, man!" I said, "I'm loser. Make it twenty."

"Sure," he said as I shuffled and won. He doubled but that was what I wanted. I won again. He tried to sweat out a fifteen. He was literally sweating out each hand. Then mopping his brow, he blackjacked and I started losing—but good. He won six of seven and took a drink between each. He was soused and a drunk is hard to beat. I used every trick I knew but he kept on winning. I remembered every card in the run. He hit nineteen and got a deuce. He couldn't lose. I was down over five hundred.

As he drunkenly swabbed his face again, I figured I was due. Taking six hundred dollars, I said, "I'm hungry and the cards are a mess. One time for six hundred, quit and go eat."

"So-o-kay. A cool beer'd taste good."

Throwing me two red jacks, he turned up an ace for himself. "Down for double," I said. And he was too drunk to object. There

was just twelve hundred in his stack which meant he had only seven hundred of his own. We hadn't bothered to hide since the other passengers went to the diner and we'd started cut-throat. Well, now I was going to get back all my money and his too. One jack had already been played. It was twenty to one for me. He covered one of my jacks with the ace of spades and the other with a queen.

I started to rake in the money but he turned over the jack of clubs—*blackjack*. *One in twenty!*

I had to do something—and quick. His drippy fingers were already picking up my money—all I had. Glancing at his soundly sleeping wife, I grabbed a coke bottle and hit him. He fell back, cold, and I collected.

Then the front door slammed. The porter was coming through and Parker had a knot on his head as big as an egg! Yanking his hat over the bump, I motioned. Bug-eyed, the porter came over as Parker snored like any whiskey souse. Parker's wife was still asleep.

Peeling off a five, I whispered, "My friend had too much. Don't wake him but get this stuff out of here."

He grinned knowingly and taking the five, whisked away the table and was gone.

Yawning casually, I studied

Grace Parker. She was as dead to the world as Parker. Easing out of my seat, I slipped out to the back vestibule. I had to get off that train. Parker might come to and start yelling. But my luck was holding; we were slowing. Some workmen waved as we crept along but I couldn't jump with them watching.

Going back to my chair, I waited, chewed my nails and planned. Maybe I could hide in the men's room, or . . . Grace Parker stirred and straightened her dress. Parker was limp as she stood up and looked at him.

"Parker had one too many," I said.

She slumped in disgust. "It figures. Tell him I'm in the diner."

She left and I was alone and . . . Parker's knob was bleeding a little and he wasn't snoring. He wasn't breathing! I felt for his pulse. He . . . He was dead!

Freezing the impulse to run, I tried to think. Nothing was different—not really. I'd have to change plans. I couldn't jump the train, Parker would have to!

He was too big to carry, besides he was clammy wet. Grabbing him under his arms, I dragged him. It was like wrestling a greased hog but I finally got him to the back. So far, so good. Using Parker's wet handkerchief, I gave the handle a

turn and yanked. The door opened and I shoved him through. He was gone in a blue. What else could I do?

Evidence . . . I had to be sure there were no give-aways. His hat lay in the floor. I kicked it out and slammed the door. No evidence—no give-away details.

I'd just ducked inside and my nerves were almost normal when Mrs. Parker came back, looking for something. Raising a brow, she looked at me.

I shrugged and motioned behind me. "Parker's in the wash room. He's in no condition but if you like, I'll be glad to tell him you're waiting."

She gave me the deep freeze and finding her purse where it had fallen behind the seat, went back again. The car was swaying and she had trouble opening the front door. In the vestibule she nearly fell as she lurched against the wall.

After a moment I gave my seat a going over and followed Mrs. Parker. No telling when Parker'd be missed. The upper half of the outside door was open in the vestibule. A lunch box, some tools and a keg of railroad spikes had been left by the workmen. No wonder she nearly fell; some of the spikes were rolling on the floor.

In the diner, Grace Parker was sitting alone and seemed nervous. Coffee or something brown stained her white glove. She was obviously disturbed and with Parker, I didn't wonder. I sat down opposite her and smiled in my best Jack Barnes manner. She smiled too, a worried smile. "Please excuse the way I acted," she said. "Allen was so . . . Don't judge him too harshly."

I said something intended to be charming but she never answered, and smiling sweetly, excused herself.

Everyone was back in our car and Mrs. Parker was waiting. "Do you know where my husband is?"

"Why no . . . Last time I saw him, he was going to the men's . . ."

"But he isn't there! The porter looked. He isn't in any of the cars!"

"Maybe he . . ."

"He fell off the train!" she cried. "You got him drunk and he fell off the train."

Everyone was staring. I tried to quiet her. And as if this was a cue, the train was coming to a stop. We were in the middle of a sunburned space that paralleled the highway. A brakeman hurried through and people shot questions but he kept going. While everything was in such a turmoil, I went

back to my chair. I could smell Parker, his sweat and whiskey and stale cigar.

The brakeman was back in a few minutes and a sailor stopped him. "Say, Mac, what's the hold-up?"

The brake shrugged. "Don't know. Th' block signal stopped us. We gotta wait till it's clear."

Grace Parker grabbed him, begging he search the train for her husband. He said the conductor was handling it and left her looking like a desert rose in a weed patch—and yes, still beautiful.

The bulge of bills in my pocket felt good and there was no reason not to be sympathetic. Besides, I had other plans. Sitting down beside Grace, I said quietly, "Mrs. Parker, I couldn't help hearing when you said Parker had all your money."

"Yes! And now you've got it!" Her voice was loud and people were looking.

"No, Mrs. Parker." I tried to speak confidentially. "Please understand. He took me too—twelve hundred dollars."

"You mean . . . Allen won?" Her voice was back to normal.

"I can afford it. But he said something you should know. It's none of my business but with him gone . . ."

"What did Allen tell you?"

"I'm sorry, but he said . . . Well,

he said, 'I've had it with Grace. Next stop, I'm checkin' it to her, catch a ride an' get back to Las Vegas.'"

She blanched, then lowering her eyes, nearly whispered, "I should have known. What . . . What'll I do, Mr. Barnes? Allen had all my . . ."

"If it's money you need, I could loan you some or . . ."

She tried to smile. "You're very kind, Mr. Barnes. Allen wasn't much of a . . . I'm sorry if I misjudged you."

I was in. I knew it as I told her to call me Jack and she half whispered, "And I'm Grace."

Just then someone cried, "Police!" And everyone ran to the windows.

Outside, a car with a whip antenna was stopping. Two men in big hats got out and were met by the conductor. In a moment they came toward our car. Suddenly, Grace ran to meet them, crying her husband had fallen off the train.

They gave her to a motherly looking woman, who took her into the next car, then came directly to me. The short one squinted at me and said, "You the man as was drinkin' with Mr. Parker?"

"He was drinking, not me."

"Lemme see some identification."

He made funny noises in his throat as he tapped it with his thumb. "J. W. Barnes, eh? What is your occupation, Mr. Barnes?"

I gave him the same answer I'd given Parker, even producing a business card. His face relaxed a bit, he even smiled. "Kinda outa my line, Mr. Barnes. When was the last time you saw Parker?"

"Well, we were playing cards but he had one drink too many. When he went into the mens' I went to the diner. When I got back he was gone."

He turned and cried, "Anyone see the man as was with this gentleman?"

No one wanted to get involved. But when the sheriff turned back his smile was gone. He sniffed as if he could smell something. "You say you didn't drink?"

"Never touch it. But Parker . . . He . . ."

"J. W. Barnes . . ." He seemed to be thinking out loud. Then frowning, he added, "Seems I've seen your name someplace." And turning to the deputy, he said, "Get the front; I'll take th' back."

After they'd gone the car buzzed like a beehive and we waited. It was close and the air-conditioner was dead with the train stalled. It seemed the smell of Parker got worse. That was probably what the sheriff was sniffing. I could hear

him and the crew banging around in back.

Then returning, he looked under the seats, all the time sniffing like a coon dog. But in a moment he grinned and offered me a cigarette.

"No, thanks. Don't smoke."

When his deputy returned with no information, they left with the conductor. Outside, I could see them talking on their police radio. Just then I realized he hadn't returned my bogus business card. But it didn't matter. There are dozens of Barnes in the L.A. directory, probably even an investment broker. But . . . he hadn't given me back my driver's license either. He might be only a County Sheriff but he was big city sharp. Drivers licenses contain a lot of identifying data—too much.

I was faking with a magazine when I saw them coming. The Sheriff stopped directly beside me, his jaw like a steel trap. He dropped the *mister* when he said, "Barnes, here's your license. It fits. But this business card is a phony."

I started to play injured innocence when he ordered, "Stand up and turn around!"

I stood. There was no blood on me. I'd only touched Parker when I dragged him to the back.

He said, "I understan' you an' Mr. Parker played cards. Was it black-jack?"

"Why yes . . . Why do you ask?"

"Let's see th' deck, the one you played with."

"Sorry, you'll have to get it from the porter."

The sheriff's nod was enough to send the conductor toward the porter's hide-out. Then he sniffed again. "You were mixed up in Big Ed Thornton's mess in L.A., and I got a feelin' you were guilty. The police sure weren't happy when that judge turned you loose."

"I was cleared."

"Yea . . . Well, a murderer is a murderer an' they even get to smellin' like one. I'm holding you for murder!"

"Now wait a . . ."

"You're under arrest, Blackjack Barnes!"

"Arrest? Who did I kill? If you're talking about Parker, he just took a powder from his . . ."

"The workmen found Parker's body. He was carrying your calling card, Blackjack, stuck in the sweatband of his hat when you threw him off the train."

"But you can't . . ."

"Yes I can. I've a hunch that jack'll match th' deck you an' Parker used."

I wasn't ready to admit any-

thing. "So he cheated," I cried. "That cuts no ice."

"No, it ain't ice but it's sure hot motive. You threw him off the train. Probably killed him first but the medics can verify that."

"Where's your witnesses?" I argued. "There'd have been a struggle. Why me? Anyone could have killed him."

He grinned wickedly. "You don't drink, remember? What's more, Blackjack, you don't smoke. Look at your shirt and sleeves—real close. It's dried sweat! And worse, it smells!"

I couldn't help looking at my sleeves. They were wilted and grimy. "See what I mean?" he said. "A man sweats the back of a shirt before the front. Your back's still got the laundry crease."

"Parker spilled whiskey on me!"

I knew he had me, when he said, "Shut up! You didn't hug him; that's sure. Ever hear of the State Crime Lab? Parker's sweat on your shirt front can be identified as his. Me . . . All I need is my nose an' the D.A. told me on the radio that that's enough, 'long with everything else I got—and your record."

It was no wonder I kept smelling Parker. A fight is second degree and I sure didn't want to risk first degree. "He jumped me!" I blurted. "He lost and accused me

of cheating. It was self-defense."

"Uh-hah . . ." He grinned. "Now we're getting somewhere. What'd you hit him with?"

"A coke bottle. It was the only . . . I didn't mean to kill him. I got scared. That's why I threw him off. I swear it!"

He spat disgustedly. "Turn around. I don't know why I talk to you, lessen it's account you killed one man an' got away with it."

He reached for his cuffs and they led me toward the front. But something wasn't right. *A coke bottle couldn't . . . That bump I gave Parker couldn't kill and yet . . . Maybe he was hit again—in the same place, when I was in back trying to get away. Grace Parker! Why didn't she awaken? Or did she?*

When we passed the tools in the front vestibule, it hit me. Two did play—at murder. She hadn't lurched. She was throwing away the real murder weapon, a railroad spike, a lot more lethal than a bottle. *She hated him. She had motive*

—plenty. And she'd said, "Allen *wasn't* much of a husband." She didn't say *isn't*.

I'd let a woman, a beautiful thorny rose, put one over. Then up comes this County Sheriff with the nose of a bird dog. Well, counting Parker's money, I had over twenty-five hundred dollars. I could get a lawyer and be out in an hour.

But just as we got to the police car, the Sheriff said, "Hold it, Charley. Search this tinhorn."

Then the deputy had my wallet and was counting the money. "Let me have it," the Sheriff said. And after counting it, he said, "Blackjack, this ain't Nevada. Gamblin' is illegal in this state. I believe it was twenty-five hundred dollars that Mrs. Parker said her husband had. I'm refundin' it, see."

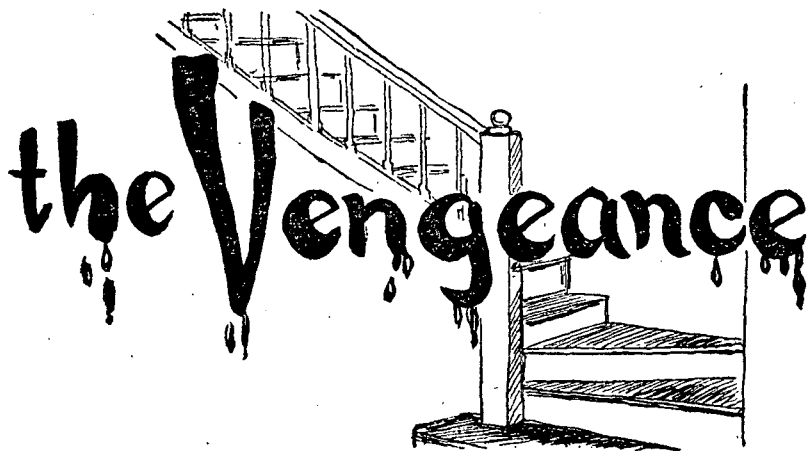
"That's a lie," I shouted. There was only ten left.

"Shut up," he snapped, and handing it to his deputy, said, "Charley, take this to Mrs. Parker. Get a receipt and have th' conductor witness it."

"Get in, Barnes."



the Vengeance



MISS PATRICIA WOODBINE walked home, alone as usual, from the Lakeville Trust Bank. She was wondering whether to eat alone at home or go out. Sometimes going out was even lonelier.

"Hello, Patricia."

She turned quickly. "Henry Dowd, you scared the life out of me!"

The small man had gray eyes behind thick-lensed glasses and the kind of face that doesn't attract attention one way or another. Patricia had known Henry since grade school days, but hadn't seen him since his wife had died some

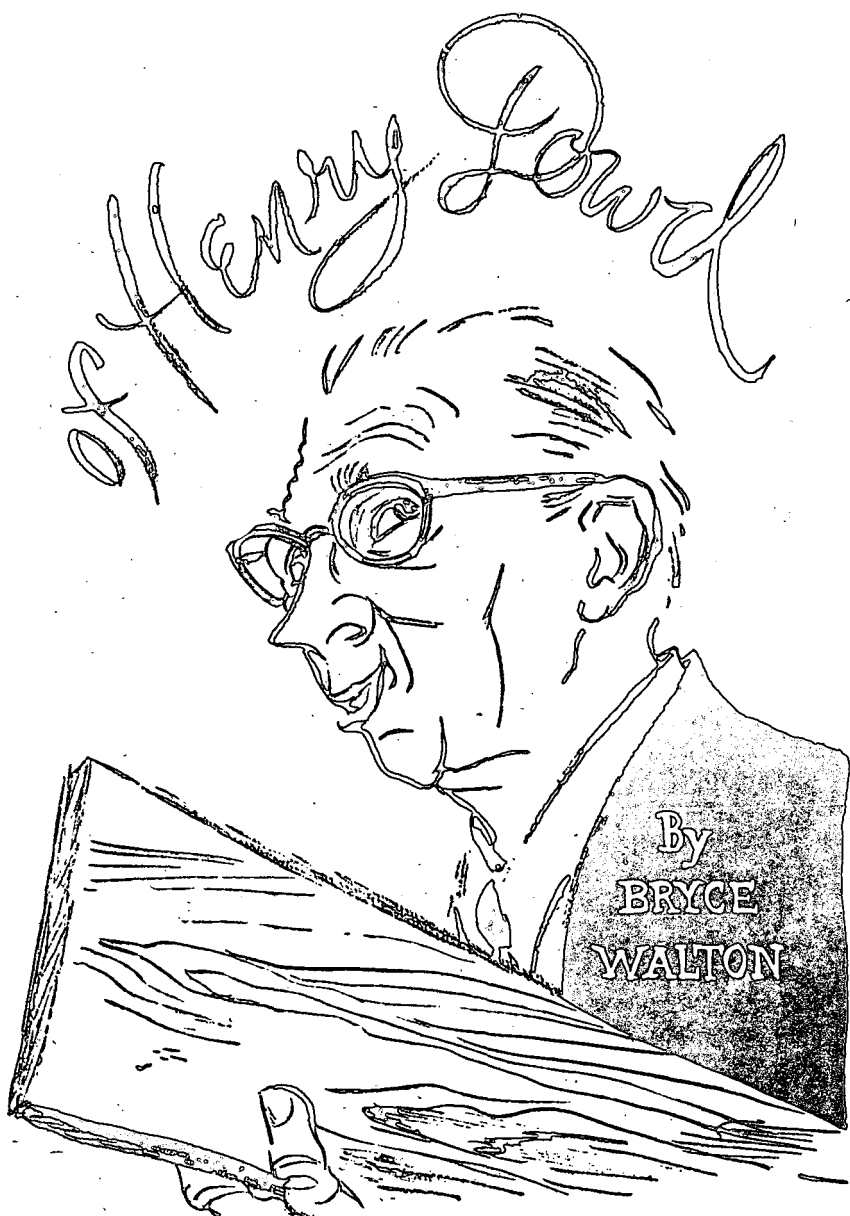
months before. Seeing him now she knew that something drastic had happened to Henry Dowd. He didn't stammer, or blush or shuffle and make a quick, self-conscious getaway. He just looked at her, very directly and solemnly.

She found herself smiling at him, coloring slightly at the frank appraisal in his eyes. She said, "You sure gave me a fright."

"No wonder," he said very seriously. "Never know who is walking the streets anymore."

His next remark startled her even more. It was totally out of familiar character. Henry Dowd

Do not be misled by the mild-as-milk aspect of our hero . . . and I call him hero advisedly, for he is of the heroic cast of mind and soul, willing to risk all for his principles.



had been the butt of cruel humor all his life. Claire Trent had married him for want of any other offers. Henry had become known as the original henpecked husband, bullied by a shrew. But now he stared right at Patricia and said with a sort of hiss in his voice, "I'm glad I scared you, Patricia."

"What?"

"I wish I'd scared you a lot more. Everybody ought to be scared." Henry's voice was soft and kind, like a doctor's. "Shaken out of their complacency. Little late to be scared, you know, after you're raped and murdered."

Then, incredibly, the shy little man gripped her arm. "I'll walk you a way, Patricia. I've got to drop an urgent letter at the post-office."

Her long face turned pink. She giggled nervously and her angular body quivered under its limp-hanging tweed. They walked under the arching trees swarming with chattering sparrows. She had always felt only pity for Henry, but now she was confused by the stirrings of conflicting emotions. Henry Dowd looked the same, but his actions made her wonder if maybe he'd been taking a Dale Carnegie course. Something had given him his new self-confidence and a change in manner. Anyway, she thought, he was a man and a

widower. He had held down the same job at Harry's Outlet for almost thirty years.

Henry stopped and looked through hibiscus bushes at the Dayton house set back under still Cypress trees. He just stood, looking. He breathed more heavily. He frowned a little. Patricia felt uneasy.

Finally Henry said, "The police have let him go."

"Who?"

He frowned slightly and worked a very dim smile along the edge of it. "He's home in there. Been home a week now, drinking, getting worked up. Getting ready."

"You mean Mr. Dayton?"

He nodded solemnly. "He's free to kill again. You know they almost always repeat."

They walked another block. Henry said, "People don't care. You're not interested either, are you, Patricia? I mean, in whether or not they should have turned Dayton loose?"

"Well, I read about it in the paper."

"Don't want to think about it?"

"I guess they know he couldn't have done—" she swallowed tightly.

Henry's smile was sad. "Couldn't even say it. Can't even think about the things he did to his wife."

"If they let him go—"

Henry laughed thinly. "They know he's guilty. But they can't do a thing about it now. Hands are tied." The sadness went out of his smile and it became a dry grin. "My hands aren't tied, Patricia. No responsible citizen's hands ought to be tied, you know."

He gripped her hand again at the corner of Avarillo Street where he had to turn off toward the post-office. He smiled mildly and politely. "It's been nice. I need someone to talk with, don't you?"

She felt a nervous giggle trying to get past her lips, but nothing came out.

"Being lonely's nothing to be ashamed of," Henry said softly. "I know how lonely summers are by yourself. My vacation's already started."

His direct interest again stirred feeling in return. Her thin mouth quivered as she smiled. "Why, I'd think you'd be out fishing at the lake, Henry."

He stiffened. "Cruelty disguised as sport. It disgusts me."

"It's just that I know you and Claire used to go fishing a lot," Patricia said quickly as Henry released her hand.

"Claire enjoyed it," Henry said tightly. "I didn't. Some people just go along, you know. They have to please and they do whatever is suggested, whatever they're told and

after a while they don't have any want of their own. They just go along and forget who they really are." He paused. "Unless they learn better." He looked away for a moment, then at his watch. "Must get to the postoffice. Letter must reach the Governor before tomorrow night."

"Governor?"

"There's a good chance that he'll grant a stay of execution to Red Jackson and save him from the gas chamber tomorrow night. I'm writing him and I'm telling him that Jackson ought to die."

Patricia blinked. "I had no idea you were interested in such things."

Henry shrugged. "Only people who voice their feelings are crackpots, you know, minority groups like anti-vivisectionists, pacifists and the like. Also those fools who don't approve of the death penalty. They write, send telegrams, have protest rallies. Decent ordinary people don't say or do anything. That's why the country's going to the dogs."

Patricia shuffled her brogans. "I just never thought much about things like that."

"You will think about it some night," Henry said sadly. "When you're attacked on the street, maybe dragged into the bushes—"

She gasped.

"Sorry, Patricia. But they'll turn

Jackson loose. Just like they did Clem Dayton. Think what Dayton did to her, Patricia. And then think of him back home, waiting, living only a few blocks away."

He looked straight into her eyes, smiling softly, until she blushed a little and had to look away.

"There's a lot to talk about, Patricia. What say I pick you up later and we eat out somewhere?"

Her mouth moved silently several times, then she blurted it out. "Why, I'd like that very much, Henry."

"Around eight then," he said as he hurried away flourishing his special airmail letter to the Governor in the air like a banner.

They sat in a secluded corner of the Palms Grill. There had been a few amused and surprised glances from acquaintances, but Patricia didn't care. It felt so good being out with somebody, and Henry had insisted they have wine and she was not only feeling good but dizzy. She giggled frequently, and didn't know why and didn't care about that either. Henry actually reached over the table and touched her hand occasionally. His touch went deep and took hold of her and spun her and made her dizzier. Her face was flushed. Sometimes, under the ta-

ble, her bony knees quivered.

"More wine, Pat?"

"Don't mind if I do, don't mind at all."

He poured. They drank. His eyes were bright through his glasses as he watched her. "Good to see you enjoying yourself, Pat."

"And I am, Henry. I really am. You have no idea."

"Oh but I do. It's like being out of jail. Some things are worse than loneliness."

"What?" she said, incredulously.

"Being married and never knowing who you are for one thing."

"Suppose so."

"Being dead, that's worse, I imagine. Getting raped, tortured, murdered. There are worse things than being by yourself." Henry sipped wine. "Those two little girls that Jackson cut up, they could tell you, only of course the dead can't say anything. Or Clem Dayton's wife could tell you, but she's dead, too."

Patricia wondered if the smile on her face looked as strained as it felt. She wanted to be cooperative in the discussion, and it wasn't really such an unpleasant subject, she decided. Sort of like the true crime stories she sometimes read and scared herself with at nights.

"Aren't criminals sick sometimes?" she said coyly. "I mean not right in the head?"

"There are no extenuating circumstances for murderers," Henry said. His mouth tightened just a bit. "Send them to a doctor instead of the gas chamber and soon they're running loose again. You can't rehabilitate them. They usually kill again." He took a clipping from his pocket and said it was a quotation from J. Edgar Hoover himself. "Most of the demands for abolishing capital punishment," Henry read from the clipping, "'come from good-hearted people who simply do not know at first hand of the horrors man can and does perpetrate against his fellow beings, and have never seen the savagely mutilated bodies and mentally ravaged victims of murder, rapists and other criminal beasts!'"

"Beasts? Did he say that?"

Henry nodded. "He should know, shouldn't he? But these minority groups, these crackpots making excuses for murderers. There's no excuse for such people. What about the Mosaic law? An eye-for-an-eye?" His smile widened and stiffened and he had it aimed past her and his eyes seemed fixed far away and on nothing in particular. "Now because someone calls himself crazy, is no excuse, Patricia. Not as far as the victims are concerned. I've had time to think a lot these past months. Kill-

ing people is a crime. I'm against that, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said quickly. "I am, Henry. I'm against it."

"So am I unless it's warranted and it seldom is, even in war. And I think that people who kill people should be killed themselves. Sane or insane. More wine?"

"Well, just a wee little bit more, Henry."

"Is saying they're sick good enough for the corpse when the sun sets forever and birds don't sing anymore? Those girls Jackson cut up. That innocent woman Dayton beat to death. They wouldn't sympathize much with their killers because they were sick, would they?"

Patricia agreed with exaggerated nods of her head. Henry Dowd's smile seemed to drift at her across the table, almost like a floating leaf in a gentle breeze. "So what if a man is mad? Mad dogs are put out of the way fast, Patricia."

They were almost down to the dregs of their last glasses of wine and it was almost ten o'clock. Henry had forgotten Red Jackson and was concentrating his indignation on Dayton. He had described, glumly, how Mrs. Flora Dayton had been found beaten to death at the foot of the stairs. A neighbor

heard screams and phoned the police who investigated just before dawn and found Clem Dayton only a few feet away from his victim. He had passed out from too much whiskey. His wife's blood was all over him. Dayton had denied killing his wife, of course. He was taken into custody and released three days later. "Sent home," Henry said sadly.

"But why?" Patricia asked, then burped gently behind her hand.

"Several reasons, I'm afraid. Dayton's family is wealthy, and could hire the best lawyers. You should have read the papers, Patricia."

"I will, Henry. I will from now on."

Henry smiled. "They couldn't find the blunt-edged murder weapon. They were short on clues, at a loss for motive. Dayton and his wife seemed to have gotten along okay. Anyway, no one said they didn't. No other woman involved. But then a madman doesn't need a logical motive, you know."

"Is Mr. Dayton a madman?"

"Not locally," Henry said softly. "But he's been in and out of several mental institutions. I phoned his hometown newspaper and checked on all these things. The police had done that too, I'm sure, but they couldn't do anything about the facts. Anyway, Dayton's

always been in trouble. A real psycho, and an alcoholic. But those things are treated differently, you know, when you have plenty of money."

Henry studied his wine glass a moment. "Claire wouldn't have approved. It's none of anyone's business, she would have said."

Patricia seized the cue. "But it is, isn't it? It's everyone's business."

He nodded gravely. "It ought to be. But letting Dayton loose isn't the fault of the Sheriff or the police."

"Then whose fault is it, Henry? It's somebody's."

"The police arrested him. They know he's guilty. They held him as long as they could legally. But the Dep. Dist. Atty. Joe Martinson refused to file a complaint. He refused to prosecute."

"But why not?"

"He had to wait, he said, until the Coroner released a report. The Coroner wouldn't release what they call a certificate of the cause of death. Even though I found out that a pathologist who performed the autopsy on Mrs. Dayton said flatly that, quote, 'she was beaten to death.'"

"Then how on earth—"

"But the Coroner said he couldn't certify the cause of death and the legal deadline was getting

nearer. Finally the Coroner did release that certificate." Henry brought a slip of paper from his pocket and held it close to his lensed eyes near the table lamp. "Cause of death, he said, was subdural and subarachnoid hemorrhage of the brain. Dayton's rich family had moved in fast to his defense. They hired big lawyers, two big doctors too. They checked the post mortem findings. The Coroner came out with another statement, something to the effect he wasn't ready to say what was the exact cause of death."

"Why, that's awful, Henry. Sounds like some silly merry-go-round."

"Doesn't it? So Dayton was finally let loose. They decided it was impossible to prove whether she died from being beaten with a blunt instrument, or from falling down stairs. She did fall down stairs. Dayton says she was drinking and fell down stairs. He was drinking too. He says he went down and picked her up and that was how he got blood all over him, but then he passed out himself."

"So what happens now?" Patricia asked, really getting excited as she focused blurredly on Henry's hazy face.

"As far as the police and the DA are concerned, nothing," Henry said. "Nothing will be done."

The official verdict is that it was an accident."

"Well," Patricia said warily. "Maybe it *was* an accident."

Henry's smile was mild and friendly, but slightly sarcastic now. "It wasn't an accident, Pat."

"You sound so sure of it."

"I am sure. I've got the proof. I know he's guilty. Tonight I'm going to try to get enough evidence so the DA will have enough proof, too. Enough proof to prosecute."

Henry had leaned forward. His voice was tight. He put his hand over hers and squeezed.

"Pat," he said tensely, "you'll help me; won't you? I need your help tonight, Pat?"

She felt scared but excited and his touch tingled up her arm. She wasn't conscious of sound, of anything except a certain feeling she'd never had before and didn't want to lose. She was dizzy, and her legs felt as though they would be weak when she stood up.

Her brain didn't seem to function.

"Yes," she heard herself say.

"Yes, Henry. If you need me."

"I need you," he said. "We can do something important, Pat. We can put a murderer away and maybe keep some other innocent person from being butchered."

Henry drove back across the

bridge toward the Muirland Park residential district in the new car that he had said was paid for in cash with part of Claire's life-insurance money. Henry had always wanted a car, but Claire wouldn't own one. Claire was conservative, very careful. She considered cars a risk. She used public conveyances, or walked. Never risk anything, Claire had said. She was a perfectionist or something maybe, Henry said. "She lived in a small world, bounded by caution."

Henry quoted J. Edgar Hoover again to the effect that crime had reached an all-time high with more than 1,500,000 serious offenses throughout the nation. Crime rate was rising four times as fast as the population. Killers, assailants, rapists and robbers committed 70 per cent more atrocities this year than last. First half of '61 showed a sharp rise of 10 percent in serious crime.

It was, Henry said, up to an aroused responsible citizenry to halt the march of crime, to see to it that criminals were punished even if you have to take a hand in apprehending them yourself. When a murderer was caught, you wrote petitions, paraded with placards, sent telegrams, and saw that the human beasts paid the supreme penalty.

"I tell you, Pat, the Mosaic law

was good enough for Biblical people and I'm strictly an eye-for-an-eye and tooth-for-a-tooth man myself. 'Thou shalt not kill', that's a good line. It sure is. And if you kill, I say this—somebody ought to kill you as fast as possible and with a minimum of sentiment or excuse. If this sounds harsh, I quote the Bible and J. Edgar Hoover as my principal teachers."

Stunned by the remarkable transformation in Henry, awed by his intensity, his conviction and commitment, she stared at the blur of trees swimming by in the moonlight. Henry might end up becoming Alderman or something. She belched and tasted sour wine in her throat.

"Where are we going, Henry?"

"Dayton's house," Henry said.

Patricia swallowed very hard and it didn't feel sour anymore. It felt as if sawdust might have been going down her throat.

"Wha— what are we going there for, Henry?"

"Same reason any decent citizen should be going there, if he had any guts," Henry said. "I'm going to get Dayton."

"Henry, oh no! You wouldn't go—you wouldn't do that!"

"I would and will," Henry said.

"But you said yourself, you said he was a—a psycho!"

"I said it and he is, Pat. But if

we don't get Dayton, who will? And if we don't, then the blood of whoever he kills next will be on our hands."

There was nothing she could say in answer to that. Anyway they were turning off the Freeway into Muirland and a few moments later they were turning into the residential area, then down Cortez Street. They were only a few blocks now from the Dayton place.

Patricia grabbed Henry's arm and clung to it. "Wha—what are we going there for?"

Henry said nothing, drove two more blocks, stopped half a block from Dayton's house. The street was dark except for one lone streetlight. It was still except for dim sounds of insects, once a tree frog, once a dog that barked three times.

Henry leaned close to her. He stared into her face. There was something odd about Henry Dowd's eyes now. They were a very pale gray through the thick lenses, and they had a look as though Henry could see beyond whatever he was looking at. He sat there a moment stiffly, his mouth half-way open.

"I've been working on this case," he said softly. "I'll tell you, Pat, we'll make a good team, you'll see."

"Yes," she said. Her mouth felt dry.

"I found the murder weapon, for one thing," Henry said.

"What?"

"Yes, and a witness. I've got testimony from a witness who saw Dayton beating his wife to death."

Of course, Henry was afraid to go alone into that house to face Dayton. He was really frightened. He admitted it. But the important crucial things were always frightening. Sooner or later everyone had to face up, didn't they? Anyway, Henry had been in to see Dayton a number of times already. He was getting used to rubbing elbows with a psychotic killer.

Dayton didn't act like a psychotic killer, Henry admitted. He didn't act like any sort of killer right now, but then most of them never do until all at once something snaps. Dayton, a big brooding man, just sat alone in that house day and night, drinking until he passed out, trying to drown that thing in him that kept building up and wanting to snap. It was in Dayton's eyes though, Henry said, if you got close and wanted to see it.

But what had Henry been doing, going to visit such a creature?

Henry was a neighbor and so he had exercised the prerogatives of the good-neighbor policy. Every

evening after work, he dropped in to say hello to Dayton. The Daytons had only recently moved into that neighborhood and Mr. Dayton had never seen Henry Dowd until the first visit. But after an initial reaction of growing suspicion and rejection, he finally invited Henry in for a drink. Dayton was in a bad way—a guilty conscience, no doubt, for even psychotic killers had one of a sort—and welcomed anybody who would sit and drink with him. Henry didn't drink much. He sat, he looked, he listened. The point, Henry said, was to gain Dayton's drunken confidence enough to gather vital information and look for tell-tale clues.

A thing about Dayton was that as he kept drinking and it got later at night, he talked more and more freely. He talked more freely about anything you happened to mention, and after a while Dayton didn't know, or seem to know, what he was talking about, but just kept on talking.

"He talked," Henry said, "and I listened. I listened with my ears. And then I listened with something else."

Henry showed a dazed Patricia the microphone the size of a half-dollar pinned behind his necktie, and tiny wires under his shirt that were connected to a pair of small

batteries in his hip pocket. Henry proudly displayed more short-range broadcasting and receiving equipment that was surprisingly compact, including a wire recorder in his inside jacket pocket no larger than a cigarette case. He also had a camera no larger than a wristwatch strapped to his right wrist. Any citizen could own and use such equipment, Henry said. It was rather expensive but that shouldn't matter to those who wanted to work and give to make democracy live. There was a touch of irony in his voice as he added that the money for the equipment had come out of Claire's life-insurance. No one would have disapproved so much as Claire, but of course she was hardly in a position to disapprove of anything these days.

"Know what Claire was doing when she had her stroke?" Henry asked suddenly. "Shouting at me, telling me where to go." He laughed softly. "Instead, she went."

They sat there in the car surrounded by silent night. Henry had turned on the ignition and the lights. Henry looked at his watch again. What he wanted to do, he said, was wait until Dayton was really soused, then go in and try to talk him into a direct confession.

"You said you found the murder weapon," Patricia whispered thin-

ly. "The police couldn't find it though, you said."

"They looked. They didn't know where to look," Henry said.

"How did you know?"

Henry leaned back and his arm slid across Patricia's shoulders. No man's arm had ever been there before, and she sat tingling and rigid, with tightly clamped mouth, but with a mixture of flame and ice shooting through her everywhere.

He had found out where the weapon was hidden by getting the information first-hand from the witness who had seen the murder committed.

"Dayton's daughter," Henry said. "Marcia. Police didn't even know his daughter was home that night. Dayton let it slip during one of our drunken talks. Seems that right after the murder, Marcia dressed, took her allowance, and ran to her grandmother's place. Only fifteen but looks older, and has learned to take care of herself, probably because her parents were usually too drunk to take care of her. Anyway she took a bus over to Clintonville to her grandmother's."

One evening Henry also went to Clintonville, with the little wire-recorder in his pocket.

Dayton had said, shedding

maudlin whiskey tears, that he had kept his daughter's name out of it because he didn't want her young innocence involved. Amusing, Henry thought, considering the horror Dayton had exposed her to that night of the brutal killing. Of course he had been drunk then and drunk when he told Henry about it, and he didn't remember much of the first and none of the second conversation. The truth, of course, was that Dayton didn't want his daughter's fatal testimony to be heard.

But Henry heard it and the wire-recorder took the testimony down as permanent evidence. Henry struck up a conversation with Marcia that evening as she walked toward her grandmother's house from a local coke rendezvous. It had been easy for Henry. He told her what he already knew and gave her twenty dollars. She was frightened and began to cry and soon blurted out everything.

"I saw my mother sitting on the floor by the bed," Marcia said. "My father was striking her on the head. She was bleeding and crying."

"What was he striking your mother with, Marcia?"

"A board. One of those bookshelf boards that sits on brackets, you know. He took it off the wall."

"Then what happened, Marcia?"

"Mother got away, screaming, and fell down the stairs. Father staggered after her waving the board and fell down the last few steps himself. Mother was dead and father was on his knees crying for a while saying he didn't mean to do it and he was sorry, then he crawled back upstairs and put the board back on its brackets. He came back down the stairs with a bottle and he sat on the floor drinking and looking at Mother and crying until he passed out.

"I got dressed and opened my savings bank and took a bus," Marcia said. "Father was always crying like that. Like mother always said, he didn't have any guts."

This was all on the spool of wire now, Henry said.

"Then why do you have to get more information out of that awful man?" Patricia asked faintly. "Don't you have enough already?"

"Maybe I won't get anything important out of him," Henry said. "But I'll try. More the better, you know. Takes foolproof evidence to convict a rich man. Maybe you don't know it, Pat, but no rich man has ever suffered the death penalty in this country. When I confront him with the evidence, his daughter's words, the murder weapon, he may confess. Specially if he's drunk enough. And by now

he sure ought to be really stewed."

Henry got a small flashlight from the glove compartment and pointed it into the rear seat of the car. He indicated the bulkier receiving set and tape recorder he had set up there. He got out of the car, opened a rear door and got in and prepared the recorder, explaining Patricia's simple cooperative duties. She got out and moved stiffly around and into the back seat and sat beside the tape recorder. He showed her how to start the spools in motion at the proper moment.

"Put these on, Pat," he said and she put on the earphones. Standing outside the car now, Henry shuffled his feet and Patricia heard the grinding sound through the earphones, and Henry said that with the microphone under his tie he was a walking transmitter. He didn't want to risk the wire-recorder this time, he said. This way there was only a slight bulge of the batteries in his hip pocket.

"Pay close attention," Henry said.

"I am," Patricia said.

"Sometime you may have to be on my end, you know. This isn't our last case, I'm sure of that, Pat."

"I hope not, Henry."

"See, I have to keep my coat buttoned. And I must be careful not to fold my arms so I won't deaden the mike."

"I see, Henry. I'm listening," she said knowing that this night marked some sort of turning point in their lives, for better or for worse, and, remembering her barren loneliness, what could be worse?

Henry looked up at the stars. "We're close enough to the house, Pat. The range of this gadget is good for over a hundred and fifty yards." He reached in through the lowered window and patted her cold hand. "When our talk starts in there, Pat, turn on the switch. Just turn it on and wait."

Then his smile became dim and dimmer and then faded altogether and she could plainly hear the crunch of Henry Dowd's footsteps on concrete, across gravel, and then the hollow sound of his mounting the wooden steps to the porch.

The excitement and the sharing and the attached feeling started a precarious glow in her chest. But still the night was blurry and she had the feeling it was unreal. The feeling grew in her and she told herself, giggling once, that all this was strictly on the fantastic side.

Their voices had come into the ear phones, faintly at first but increasing in volume as the two men approached each other.

"Hi, neighbor," Henry Dowd said, very gently and politely.

Dayton's voice was slurred and thick and he was obviously very drunk. It was a very drunk voice and it sounded somehow even more distant than it was. It didn't sound like a psychotic killer at all. It sounded sort of sad and lost, like a child's voice. Oddly enough it reminded her of the pity she had once felt for Henry Dowd.

"It's you again, Dowd, isn't it?"

"Thought I'd drop in for a drink, Clem."

"Sure, why not?"

There was the distinct sound of clicking glass, liquid pouring.

"How you feeling, Clem? Better?"

"Worse," growled Dayton. "I didn't think I could feel worse but I do. Know something, Dowd? It'll get even worse before it gets better."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Dowd said. "Buck up, Clem."

"What the hell," Dayton said. "I don't get it, Dowd. I don't get it at all. You keep coming in here and—why, Dowd? I don't get it. What's in it for you? Who gives a damn about Clem Dayton?"

"Someone was thoughtful once when I needed a friend," Dowd said. "I haven't forgotten it."

Dayton laughed harshly. It grated through the phones deep into Patricia's ears and vibrated around her skull bones. "Know some-

thing, Dowd? I don't believe it. Never did believe anybody ever did anything because they liked me, *me* I mean, Clem Dayton. Know something, I been thinking. First time in my life I ever was able to think about things, being here by myself day and night."

"What have you thought about, Clem?"

"Hell, everything. Mostly me. I never was any good, Dowd. Never was worth a damn to anybody, myself, especially my wife. I thought she married me for my money, wanted me for that like everybody else always did. I was wrong, wrong all the way, dead wrong. That's it, Dowd." He laughed again. "Dead wrong. Took it out on everybody, but it was me all the time. So what? So what's the difference now?"

There was a pause during which Patricia could hear heavy breathing. It must be Henry's heavy breathing, she thought.

"There's a difference now," Henry said, so softly that Patricia had to strain to hear him. "Your daughter's gone. Your wife's gone. Everybody seems to be gone."

A long pause. "My daughter?" Dayton said, in a half-choking voice. "What about her?"

"You told me all about her the other night, remember?"

"No, I don't remember. I have

these blackouts. I don't remember anything except—"

"Except what, Clem?"

Henry's footsteps ground into Patricia's ears.

"Where you going, Dowd?" Dayton yelled thickly.

"Upstairs," Dowd said.

"What for, what's the idea?"

Patricia heard only footsteps, a grating sound, more footsteps as Dowd came back down the stairs.

"What's that?" Dayton whispered.

"You really don't remember?"

Henry said, his mild voice gently tinged with sarcasm. "This is the board you used to beat your wife to death with, Clem."

Patricia heard only heavy breathing for a moment.

"Your bloody fingerprints are right here on the wood," Henry said, "And here, along the edge, Clem. See, bits of hair and blood?"

Patricia heard a choking sound, stumbling steps. A piece of furniture seemed to crash inside Patricia's head.

"I talked to your daughter, too," Henry was saying. "Marcia told me everything."

"Marcia—"

"It's my duty to take this evidence to the police," Henry said. "I guess you know that."

"What?" Dayton mumbled. "What—Dowd—who are you?"

"Just a neighbor," Dowd said, gently. "So I have to go to the police with this evidence. Clem, do you want to tell me about it? How you beat her up there in the bedroom, how she tried to get away and fell down the stairs?"

There was a moment of silence during which Patricia held her breath. Then she heard the terrible sounds. It was a few seconds before she realized that the sounds were made by a man crying. She had never heard a man cry and it was a reluctant, terrible noise.

"Now I remember," Dayton

said. "Yes, I guess that's what I've been trying to do all the time, sitting here trying to remember, like trying to remember a bad dream. Like—God, oh God, help me!"

"Tell me about it," Henry said soothingly. "It's always a good thing to talk about it, Clem."

"She was going to leave me. I hated her, I think I hated her because she knew I was no good and I didn't want—God help me, I hated her for showing me up, for telling me the truth and—"

"So you took this board and killed her, Clem, is that right?"

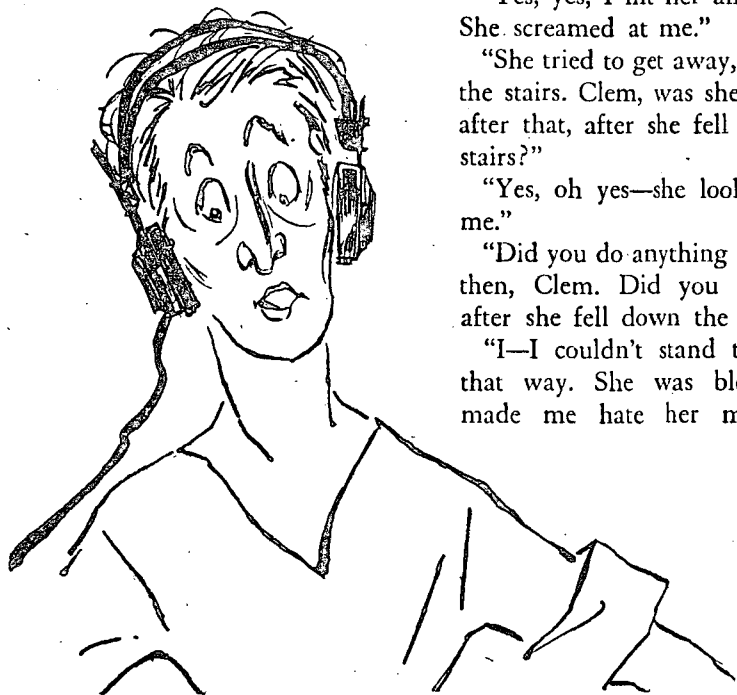
"Yes, yes, I hit her and hit her. She screamed at me."

"She tried to get away, fell down the stairs. Clem, was she still alive after that, after she fell down the stairs?"

"Yes, oh yes—she looked up at me."

"Did you do anything else to her then, Clem. Did you touch her after she fell down the stairs?"

"I—I couldn't stand to see her that way. She was bleeding. It made me hate her more, why



should she have to look that way, like it was all my fault, like everything that ever happened in this damned world was all my fault? I—"

"What did you do to her then, Clem?"

"I—hit her again. Yes, I remember. I hit her again and then—she died. She went away, stopped accusing me then. I remember that's how it was. She seemed to go away and couldn't make me feel that way again, I mean like I was nothing at all."

"She was alive when she fell down the stairs," Henry said. "She was alive after that, and then you hit her again and then she died. Is that right, Clem?"

Patricia heard Dayton's voice, muffled and sounding a great distance off. She had the idea that Dayton had fallen against Henry, was clinging to him crying, his body muffling the microphone.

"That's what happened," Dayton said. "That's the way it was and I was trying to remember it, trying all the time and didn't know—"

Patricia sat in the darkness of the automobile's back seat, a sick sensation enveloping her, as the ear phones went dead.

Patricia and Henry were married on the morning of June 4th,

and Henry was preoccupied as they drove to a lodge in the Callistoga Mountains. Patricia unpacked while Henry set up a special radio he had brought along on their honeymoon. There were facilities for swimming and boating and sunbathing, but Henry sat in the room all afternoon and evening near the radio listening to newscasts. On every newscast there was some mention of Clem Dayton's date with the gas chamber at midnight.

It occurred to Patricia that Henry had selected their wedding day to celebrate Dayton's execution but she had tried very hard not to think about it. Anyway, why not? Wasn't it Clem Dayton who had brought them together?

After eleven, Patricia sat on the bed. She wore a thin nightdress and sat waiting for Henry. She felt cold, although the room was warm, and she sat stiffly with her long arms crossed over her chest. Henry sat in front of the radio, leaning slightly forward, his head cocked to the side, a tiny frown of concentration on his forehead. He was still dressed in the black suit he had worn driving to the lodge.

She realized that the voice coming from the radio was that of a reporter in the death house and that he was talking about Clem

Dayton, and there was an interview with a guard, and with someone else, but she didn't want to listen.

Once she moved her head. It felt very heavy as though steel clamps were attached to her temples and pressing against her brain.

"Henry," she said with a wan smile. "Aren't you coming to bed?"

Henry didn't answer. He was breathing more heavily. Sweat stood out on his thin upper lip.

"Henry," she said as though she had glue in her mouth. "Dear?"

He sat stiffly, staring, his mouth half-way open and then the image of his face leaped at her with unreal clarity. He reminded her, as he sat there, of a housecat about to leap on a mouse.

Then the clock's hands pointed to midnight.

Henry sagged in his chair. His head fell back, and a long sigh came out of him. He sat that way for some time, his arms hanging

loose and his face drained of all color.

He turned towards her with a faint smile as the grimace faded from his face. His eyes gradually lost their glazed look and the stiffness was gone from his lips. It was a slow change and he went through it quietly and calmly, and finally he stood up and moved toward her gently, completely relaxed.

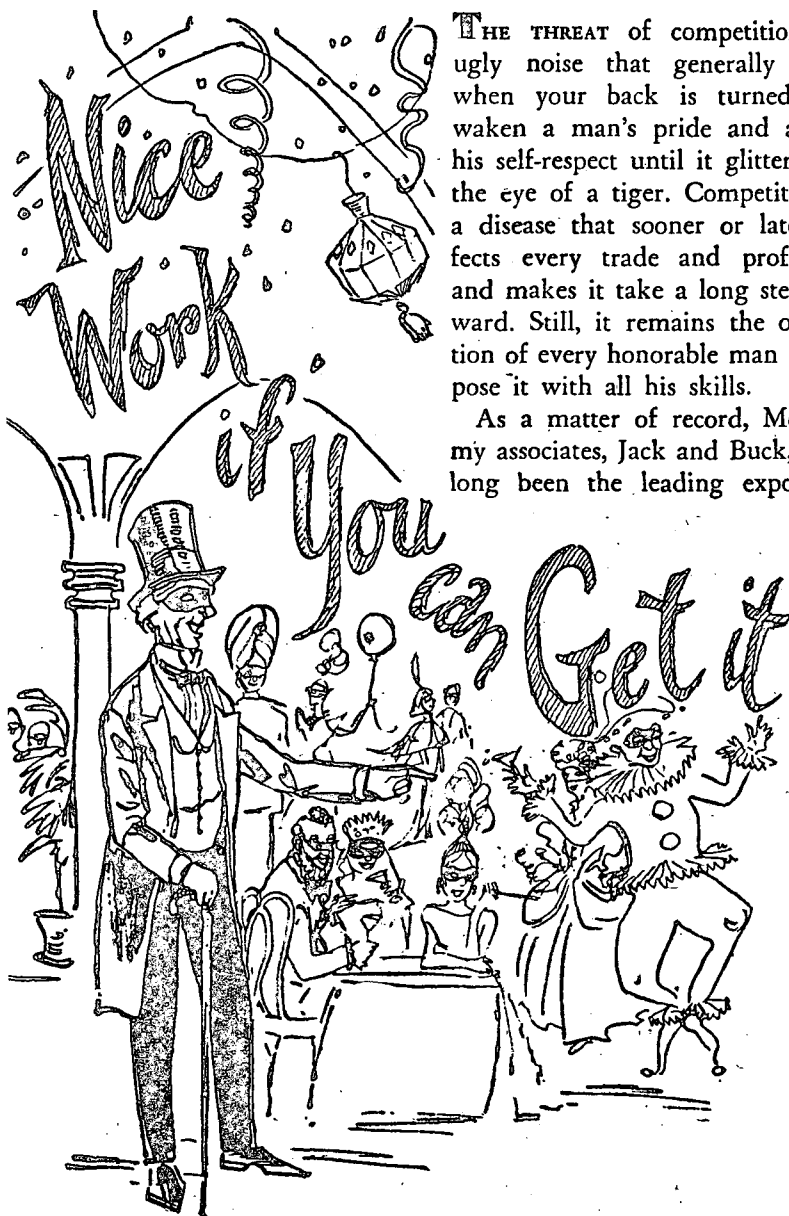
She backed away from him feeling a sense of growing nausea and revulsion.

"You said it was a terrible thing," she whispered, "but we did it. You and I did it." The words came out of her as if she were throwing up curdled milk.

"What, dear?" Henry Dowd said.

She fell back on the bed and began to laugh in a series of sharp spasms, and above her the thick-lensed eyes of Henry Dowd came down with their calm farseeing look of a master strategist.





THE THREAT of competition, an ugly noise that generally starts when your back is turned, can waken a man's pride and arouse his self-respect until it glitters like the eye of a tiger. Competition is a disease that sooner or later infects every trade and profession and makes it take a long step forward. Still, it remains the obligation of every honorable man to oppose it with all his skills.

As a matter of record, Me and my associates, Jack and Buck, have long been the leading exponents

Before you abduct anyone for ransom, it is prudent to make sure the family of the victim is willing and anxious to have him back, for a consideration, of course.



of the delicate art of scoop-'em-up, which is the art of abduction fined down to a science whereby not a footprint, fingerprint, howl, yelp, or regret is left behind. Perfection is the only formula for success in this tricky profession. Tyros have long studied our techniques and have tried, with no luck, to emulate them.

So I was quite surprised to hear one day that another organization had scraped up the men, the courage and the resources, to go into

competition with us. I met the captain of the crew one afternoon while paying my semi-annual visit to my aged father (a retired second-story man who had developed vertigo) at the Home For Retired Vikings, which is a fine old institution maintained by the trade, catering to sore-footed footpads, conscience-stricken swindlers, abstemious rum runners, arthritic forgers and cattle thieves turned vegetarian.

On the way back to the bus I chanced to run into Barney Blue,



an old friend from bars both legal and alcoholic. Barney had been visiting his father, an old safecracker who had been forced into premature retirement after developing an unaccountable fear of the dark.

"Bush," said Barney to me as we headed for the bus, "I have long admired your organization. You and your boys have stood pre-eminent and par-excellent in the field for years. Your capers have captured the hearts of bold men everywhere and become veritable textbooks on the art. I know all this because I've been studying them for years. Now, having learned the craft from the master, I've organized a little group of my own and we're going into competition with you."

"We're a nation of free enterprise, Barney," I said. "There's nothing wrong with you going into business for yourself, but I ought to warn you that you'll be doing yourself a severe disservice by announcing yourself as a competitor. You're encroaching on very, very private ground. Why try and buck perfection? Why don't you take your boys and go into something that calls for initiative, like holding up stagecoaches or selling protection to the vendors on the Oregon Trail?"

He laughed; but it was a terse sound.

"Don't like the idea of somebody coming into your pasture, eh, Bush," he said. "Well, maybe the profession can stand a little more dash and daring. The talk is that you and your boys have become a bit smug and conservative lately. The grapes are withering on your vine, old boy," he said.

Well, I laughed him off gently. But when I returned home I found myself brooding a bit. Perhaps it *was* true that we had been doing some laurel-resting of late. I felt that we were on top and could afford to coast. But now this threat of competition cast a new light on everything. It was just possible that Barney Blue and his boys could score some tremendous coup and put us in the background. I decided there was but one thing to do; give my career a fresh crown. So I gathered together the boys and let them know.

"In order to repel this dreary threat," I said to Buck and Jack, "we have to perform a job which, for skill and audacity, will belittle anything that Barney Blue and his boys can conceive, as well as make all our previous efforts look like blueprints. We have to swing a job that will gladden every heart in the Home For Retired Vikings, give inspiration to novices and hope to failures, as well as teach an enduring lesson to Barney Blue and

his boys." And I meant *enduring*.

"It sounds big," said Jack.

"It will have to be big," I said. "It can be nothing less than the greatest scoop job in history. I want a job of such magnitude that it will bathe our competitors in shame, of such brilliance that historians the world over will skip a hundred pages in their manuscripts and begin recording us in the next century."

Jack beamed happily; the boys had an ardent and spirited attitude in these matters. Big Buck remained sullen, but I could tell that even he was inspired.

"Who do you have in mind as a subject, Bush?" Jack asked.

"See if you can guess: who is the richest man in the world?"

"Not him," said Jack, shocked.

"Yes, him," I said.

"But it's practically impossible to get near him," Jack said. "He's only too well aware of people like us. His car is a tank and his bodyguards are Neanderthals."

"Those are his achievements," I said. "He also has his weak points. He's impressed and disarmed by millionaires and other dubious celebrities."

"Who are we talking about?" Buck asked, making a rare utterance. He was strictly brawn.

"J. J. Griggen, the bilious billionaire," I said.

"The oil man," Jack said.

"Yes," I said, "oil. Whenever any thing in the world stops, stalls, or squeaks, it's another windfall for J. J. Griggen."

"He sounds likely," Buck said.

"We can ask five million for him," I said. "And get it. We'd be depriving him of a week's salary, but what of it. He'll buy up a few Congressmen, have them put through a ransom-is-deductible law, and then forget about the whole thing."

"But how do you make the scoop?" Jack asked.

"I've got that worked out," I said. "Barney Blue's audacious intrusion upon our personal domain has inspired me to conceive the noblest attempt of our career. J. J. Griggen is going to attend a Charity Ball for Overprivileged Children two weeks from tonight. The ball is being held in order to raise funds to build mosaic handball courts for these kids in their Adirondack summer retreats. And the enchanting thing is it's going to be a masquerade ball. It was in the papers today. Boys," I said, "pick out your costumes, unbutton your alter egos, and let your hearts sing out—for we're going to a ball!"

From Handy Harry, the corner forger, we obtained our invitations to the ball. It was being primed as the social event of the season,

and little did the primers know how eventful it was going to be. The affair was going to be held at one of those commodious Long Island mansions where they play polo in the living room on rainy days. We drove out there several times to inspect the premises, then back to the city to formulate the plan which, as it took shape, was by turn feasible, infallible, ingenious and diabolic.

I chose the costumes for my entourage. Buck was going to go as a cave man, *Homo extinctus*, with loin cloth, club and scowl. Jack was going to be Lord Byron, with frills and ruffles and pithy couplets. I was going to be Millard Fillmore, dignified and undistinguished. And with us we were bringing an added, unannounced guest who was going to play an important role later in the evening.

We arrived at the ball at about nine-thirty. The place was ablaze with lights and jewels. They were all there, dukes and duchesses and princes and princesses from places that are remembered today only by stamp collectors and retired map-makers; and all the playboys and tycoons and titans, and the men who live in Wall Street's shadow and the women who shadow Wall Street's men. All of them in costume. The grand ballroom was a whirl of bizarre celebrities. I

shook hands with Oliver Cromwell, Talleyrand, William McKinley (there were three of them), Julius Caesar, Beau Brummel, Marie Antoinette, Madame Du Barry and dozens of others.

After an hour or so of calculated mingling, I finally caught sight of J. J. Griggen. Humble man that he was, he had come as Moses; not Michelangelo's Moses, but Griggen's Moses, short and paunchy and ferret-eyed. He might have been the real article, the way everyone stepped aside for him and stared after him.

I jostled him at the punch table.

"Excuse me, Moses," I said, and he laughed. He liked that.

"So you recognized me, eh?" he said.

"It was easy."

"And who might you be?" he asked.

"President Millard Fillmore," I said.

"President of what? G.M.?"

"U.S."

"Ah Steel!" he said and graciously patted me on the back. "Always a pleasure, always a pleasure. Are you really in Steel, sir?"

"In a way, if you want to say it's a play on words."

We talked, and while I beguiled the old boy with anecdotes, I was maneuvering him out onto a balcony. Outside, on the balcony, out

of sight, we met a caveman. With a club.

"Ah," said Griggen with a laugh, "a representative of Organized Labor!" He offered to shake hands. But this caveman was not one for social niceties. One tap with the club and J.J. Griggen was stretched out on the balcony.

Then we went to work. Buck retrieved the parcel we had cached there, containing the unannounced guest—a bearskin which we had bought from a store that sells bearskins and halberds and morions and shrunk heads and Minié balls from the Gettysburg battlefield. While I propped up old J.J., Buck fitted him into the bearskin and zipped him up. Then Buck hefted the bear into his arms and I led them back into the ballroom.

"Thomas Jefferson," I announced to all the smiling, costumed guests, "leading behind me the symbolic brawn and brute strength of America." Several men, Lewis and Clark particularly, cheered, while a woman said how cunning it was.

I led the symbols out the front door and down the path to the parking lot. There I found Lord Byron at the wheel of our car, the motor running, the back door open. Buck dropped the bear onto the back seat and got in beside it. Then we took off down the driveway and through the gate where

the special police in charge there for the evening saluted us nicely; after all, it wasn't every night they saw Millard Fillmore, Lord Byron, a cave man and the world's richest bear.

We sped along the dark, woodsy Long Island lanes, towards the little cabin I had prepared, up a dirt road, perfectly secluded. While it wasn't one of the great mansions that Griggen was accustomed to, he was going to have to call it home for the next few days.

By the time we pulled up to the place in dark, warm, crickety night, Griggen was beginning to stir. I don't suppose he had any idea what he was wearing (I think there is hardly a man anywhere who can conceive of himself waking up in a bear skin), but he began to yell for us to get the horrid thing off of him, and in a voice that bespoke authority, hurrying subordinates, scurrying waiters, scuttling doormen and gushing oil wells. But we were having none of his impertinence. Buck—Buck, who was rich only in brawn and friends—Buck told him to shut up. Griggen almost gagged on that.

We led him into the cabin and then removed the bear skin. Griggen looked with amazement at the thing, then peered at us in our costumes, and I guess the knock on the head made him lose his bear-

ings for a moment, as he said:

"What have I fallen into—a time machine or a lunatic asylum?"

"Neither, Mr. Griggen," I said.

"We're all fugitives from the charity ball and you're our guest. In the spirit of the evening I might say that we're masquerading as your abductors and you as our victim, but don't believe it—the ball is over and this is the real thing."

"This is an outrage!" he howled.

"Agreed," I said. "But we haven't brought you here because we needed a fourth for bridge. I warn you, we're desperate men who will stop at nothing to achieve our aims. So please sit down and make yourself comfortable. This whole outrageous business won't take more than a day or two, depending upon what cooperation we receive from you."

"Cooperation? What are you talking about?" he demanded, cutting quite an indignant figure in his toga.

"We're going to trade you for five million dollars, and at the same time make you famous not only in the world of high finance and low dealings, but in the history books too. You are now a key figure in the greatest scoop-up caper of all time. Welcome to the history books, Mr. Griggen. You've risen this evening from the footnotes to a chapter-heading." He was perverse-

ly unimpressed, however.

"You'll never get away with this, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

"Fillmore."

"Damn you, Fillmore. You can't do this to me. It's an outrage, and besides, I can't stand notoriety."

"It's already half done, Mr. Griggen. Now, we've got beer and baloney in the ice box. Not very substantial, but homey. Won't you join us?"

Later we changed clothes, and Moses, Byron, Fillmore and the nameless cave man vanished. As befitted a man of his economic stature, Griggen proved quite a nuisance. He was forever demanding a battery of telephones with which to call his lawyers. Only when we threatened to put him back into the bear skin and train him to ride a bicycle, did he finally desist and go to sleep. Buck sat watch over him while Jack and I sat in the kitchen and drank beer and congratulated ourselves.

"Let Blue and his boys top this one," I said with pardonable pride. "Once they hear about it they'll pull in their nets and close shop and leave the field to the professionals."

"I have to hand it to you, Bush," said Jack. "You've got genius. But do you really think we'll get five million for him?"

"No question about it," I said.

"Now you could never get five million for the King of England or for a billionaire's grandson; but for somebody like J.J. Griggen, yes, absolutely—because he's still capable of making that a hundred times over; that's why whoever we contact will be only too eager to dish it out and get him back. Griggen can go right back to his desk, roll up his sleeves and start making money again. Get it?"

"What a theory," Jack said admiringly. "Pure genius." It was a conservative estimate at best, but I blushed nevertheless.

The next morning we jostled Griggen out of bed, treated him to a free breakfast and then got down to brass facts, as my old grandpa used to say.

"Whom do we contact for the payment?" I asked.

"I'm not saying a word," Griggen said.

"Mr. Griggen," I said, giving him my darkest and deadliest look, "we have in the basement of this cabin a medieval torture chamber, replete with racks, whips, vises and long playing records of television commercials. If you don't prove to be an amenable client you'll find yourself subjected to the more barbaric side of human nature. Now—answer the question."

He sighed. He was beaten and, shrewd business man that he was,

saw it. But he made the best of it.

"You contact my wife, Mrs. Hildegard Griggen." He gave us the number. "She's the only one who can do anything. She has the key to my vault."

"Is she an hysterical woman?"

"Cold as ice."

"She'll follow my instructions?"

"If she knows my welfare depends on it, certainly."

"Excellent."

That afternoon I drove into town and stepped into a phone booth, about to make a thin dime turn into five million dollars. I dialed the number J.J. had given me, and waited. The phone rang and rang, and rang and rang. After five minutes I decided there wasn't going to be an answer. I returned to the cabin.

"What did you give me here, boy," I asked Griggen, "Custer's number on the Little Big Horn?"

"What do you mean?" he asked. "That's Mrs. Griggen's private phone."

"It's so private that nobody answered."

"That's not so odd. Mrs. Griggen is very active."

"Won't she be sort of alarmed at your being missing?"

"Not yet she won't. I often spend the night away from home. My interests are far-flung, Mr. Fillmore; they demand constant attention,

day and night; as you'll soon learn."

I tried again, later that afternoon, then that evening again. No answer. I was beginning to get nervous about things. A man like J.J. Griggen does not remain missing for long without about a thousand people starting to miss him. Once somebody caught wise to what was going on there would be enough heat put on to fry every egg in New Jersey.

"Didn't your wife accompany you to the ball?" I asked this creature of opulence.

"No," said Griggen. "She doesn't like those things. I wish you would get hold of her and consummate this deal. I'm getting damned sick of this place."

That night passed and then it was morning again.

"This has to be it," I said to Jack. "We either contact the old lady today or we have to let him go. By tonight he'll be so thoroughly missed that I wouldn't be surprised if both Wall Street and the Wall of China collapsed. We'll have the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard and a reactivated CCC looking for us."

So I drove back to town, thinking again about the thin dime that stood between me and five million dollars. I would tell Mrs. Griggen not to be panicky, not to tell a soul, merely to go into the vault with a

shovel and a barrel and she could have her husband back.

But I didn't tell her anything. Because she wasn't there. All I got for my dime was a soft constant ringing of a telephone. Then I had to hang up and go back to the cabin.

"Mr. Griggen," I said to him, "you're a free man. Go back to your oil wells."

"Are you getting the five million?" he asked with a certain fascinated interest.

"Go home, Mr. Griggen," I said. I couldn't wait to get him out of my sight. It hurt me to look at him.

We watched him walk through the door, down the path and out into the road.

"There goes five million dollars, tax-free," I said to my tragic-faced associates. "Lost for want of a woman's voice. All she had to do was come home from the beauty parlor or the tea at Mrs. Vanderfeller's or wherever she was, and say hello into the phone, and we had five million."

"This will become a day of mourning for me," said Jack.

Buck grunted.

Being an odd fellow, not wanting notoriety, J.J. Griggen said nothing to the police of what had happened. And I, of course, was not about to go mentioning it to

people. For one thing, I didn't want our abysmal competitors, the Barney Blue boys, to hear about how I had to let five million dollars pass through the door. It would have cast a tarnish on my reputation that not even the latest detergent could have gotten out.

As it was, I ran across the Barney Blue some weeks later at a downtown tavern where gentlemen of a certain stripe generally converged.

"How is my competitor?" I asked him.

Instead of the bright smile and flippant remark, all I got from him was a glum look.

"We're out of it, Bush," he said. "The field is all yours again. And believe me, after getting my feet wet in the profession and seeing what a complicated business it is, you have all my esteem and admiration."

"Well, thank you, Barney, thank

you very much. You're giving up?"

"We tried something big, but it didn't work out. I guess we just didn't have your know-how. Do you know who we scooped up, Bush?"

"Tell me."

"The wife of the richest man in the world—Mrs. J. J. Griggen. It worked out perfect, except we couldn't get the old man on the phone to hold him up."

"This was about three weeks ago?" I asked, trying to maintain my composure as the blood left my body.

"Exactly. How did you know?"

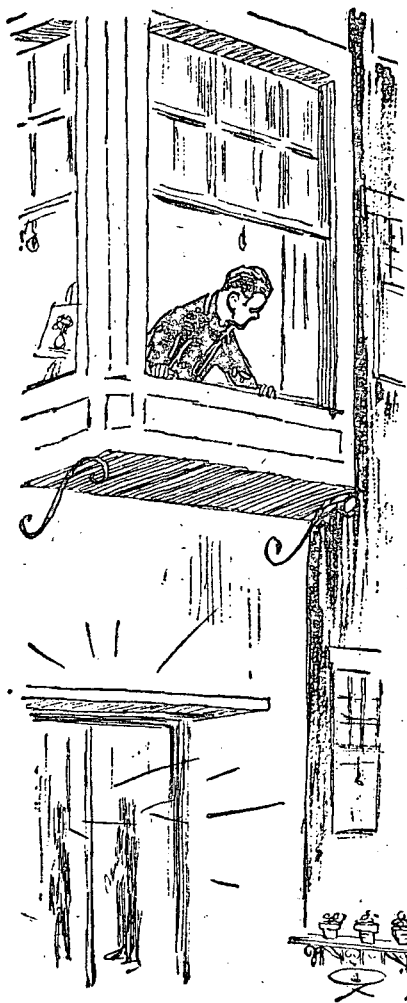
"There are no secrets in this business, Barney. None at all," I said. And for the first time I could see myself sitting on a rocking chair on the porch of the Home For Retired Vikings, discussing burglar alarms, alert policemen, eye-witnesses, and all the other pitfalls of the profession.



Every Tuesday

Don't miss the most unusual and exciting suspense television show of the week—ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS. Check your favorite TV program-guide for the time this top-rated mystery show reaches your area.

An artist is popularly supposed to be a poor business man, always in need of money. With rare exceptions, this is the case. We deal here with one of those rare exceptions.



MARTIN stared balefully at the still life tacked to his easel. His was a small mean talent, he realized. Long ago he had given up all hope of becoming a renowned artist and had contented himself with being a second-rate dauber. Yet occasionally he did sell. More often perhaps than his friend, Nathan, whose splashes of bold color and bizarre designs accentuated his own mediocrity.

He wandered over to the wide bay window and leaned against the frame. Half an hour to kill before he met Nathan at Paddy's Bar to lift a few as a prelude to making

NO

the regular rounds of the Village.

On the floor below he could see the wilted geraniums and dried-up ivy on the Brackhams' terrace. A pang of envy shot through him at the thought of Charles Brackham. The man was tall, powerfully built, with strong, finely chiselled features. Brackham owned the house and Martin had been told that he was a power on Wall Street. He'd heard other rumors too lately, that Brackham had overshot the mark and was in hot water, that his wife, Betty, held most of the property in her name and refused to help him.

Whatever else he might envy Brackham, he certainly didn't covet his wife. Betty was a faded blonde with a shrewish manner and a whining voice. Often, as he stood here in the window, he could hear the couple bickering. Usually the

they sounded different. The man's tones were quieter than usual with a sneering, mocking edge. The woman sounded taut, hysterical, as though she were genuinely frightened.

Martin leaned out the open window to catch the words.

She was saying, "Take the pearls. They must be worth a couple of thousand. Take anything you want. I'll never complain, if you'll just go away and leave me alone."

The answer was spoken in a lazy drawl. "What good are the pearls to me? I wouldn't have the foggiest idea where to sell them. Everybody knows I'm a lousy business man."

There were other sounds then, hard to identify. A cry, broken off almost before it had started, the sharp release of breath that could be a gasp of pain, followed by a

BUSINESS MAN

by Wenzell Brown

quarrel would end with Charles slamming out of the apartment and the smothered sounds of Betty's weeping.

They were going at it now, hammer and tongs. Only tonight

muffled thud, like that of a body crumpling to the floor.

Martin listened intently. Minutes passed in silence. Then somewhere a door was shut softly and light footsteps made a slithering descent.

Martin remained motionless, his heart pounding painfully, tremors racing along the backs of his hands. Had murder been committed in the room below? If so, it was his duty to call the police, but the thought appalled him. He knew himself to be a timid, ineffectual man. What if he was mistaken? He imagined the bullying voices of the police, their ridicule and scorn. Even if he was right, would he be able to stand up against a man like Charles Brackham? In his mind was a deadly certainty that Brackham would somehow turn the tables on him. He might even be accused of the crime.

Knuckles rapping at his door startled him from his gloomy reverie and threw him into momentary panic. But it was only the janitor come to fix a leaking faucet. Martin watched and tipped the man sparingly. He thought of speaking to him of what he had heard but his instinctive caution warned him to remain silent. It was no affair of his, and he wanted no part of it.

He arrived at Paddy's Bar a few minutes late. Nathan was already in the midst of a group of convivial drinkers but he crossed the room to throw his arms about Martin in an exuberant embrace.

"Marty boy, tonight we celebrate. I just sold a picture. We'll hit every

bar in the Village. What do you say, man?"

Martin protested feebly, pointing out that every time that Nathan made a sale he spent the money in a single night.

Nathan cut him off. "That's what the folding stuff's for. Easy come; easy go. That's my motto."

Martin had intended to ask Nathan's advice but there was no chance to do so without blurting out the story in front of half a dozen people. As the drinks flowed faster and faster, he almost forgot about the Brackhams and, when he remembered, the details of what he had heard were blurred and fuzzy like those of a half-remembered dream.

It wasn't a nightmare, though. When he got home, the place was swarming with police. Maybe if he'd been sober he would have told them the truth but he'd had enough to drink so that he was sure they'd trip him up. So he'd held his tongue and claimed he hadn't heard a thing.

He'd expected the cops to be on his back but everything went smooth as butter. During the next week a Lieutenant Payson from Homicide dropped around a few times to check on his story but he'd trapped himself into silence and there was no way out. And why should there be? He had nothing

to gain by blabbing to the police.

All the same, Brackham's calm manner irritated him. At first the man had assumed a phony air of grief but, by the week's end, he was his usual self, striding along as though he owned the world, giving Martin a supercilious smile when he met him on the stairs. He wouldn't be so cocky if he knew the power that Martin held over him. Come to think of it, why shouldn't he be told? Martin had done him a big favor. Brackham ought to be grateful.

The more Martin turned the matter over in his mind, the more certain he was that he should approach Brackham. It wouldn't be blackmail. He wouldn't make any threats or mention money. Just the barest of hints that he was hard up ought to turn the trick.

Martin steeled himself for the interview. He mustn't forget the man was a cold-blooded killer. To brace him alone in his apartment was too dangerous. He'd have to catch him in a public place with enough people around for protection but none within earshot.

That evening he trailed Brackham when he left the house. The man made it easy for him. Within a few minutes he entered a restaurant. A plush place, not the kind where Martin ever ate. Martin hesitated, then summoning all his

courage, followed his quarry inside. The set-up was perfect. The restaurant was half filled but Brackham sat alone at a table in the corner.

Brackham's eyebrows shot up in an expression of annoyance when Martin slipped into the seat opposite him.

Martin had his speech all prepared but he had a hard time getting the words out and couldn't keep the stammer from his voice.

"Mr. Brackham, there's something I think I ought to tell you about your wife's death."

As Martin stumbled through the story the man's manner changed, becoming disarmingly cordial. He wanted all the details and Martin gave them to him, feeling a surge of victory swelling inside him. He had Brackham by the short hairs. The guy wasn't even putting up a fight.

When he'd finished, Brackham said seriously, "I want to thank you, Martin. I really do. Now I'm going to ask one more favor."

"Sure. Anything I can do."

"Just wait here for a few minutes. There's someone else I think should hear your story."

Martin was confused but he nodded. Brackham rose and strode to a telephone booth in the corner. The conversation didn't take more than a minute and then Brackham

was back, urging Martin to have a cocktail with him.

Martin had the sudden impulse to run but that was crazy. Maybe Brackham had called a friend to bring some money over. Maybe the pay-off would come right now without any fuss, bother or hint of blackmail.

A shadow fell across the table and Martin looked up. His stomach seemed to cave in and it was all he could do not to scream. The man standing there was Lieutenant Payson.

Brackham was on his feet, smiling. He said, "Thank you for coming so quickly, Lieutenant. You'll remember Martin, I'm sure. The boy's got a story you should hear. Of course, he should have given his information immediately but I hope you won't be rough on him. Martin didn't mean to do anything wrong. He's just a timid type."

Payson nodded solemnly and took a seat. Dazedly Martin repeated his story, while the Lieutenant took notes. Then Payson suggested that he should go back to Martin's room. Martin was scared stiff but, throughout the interview, Payson remained courteous. No rough stuff at all. Just a gentle insistence that Martin go over the ground again and again until the words were almost automatic.

Not until two hours later did

Payson rise to leave. He said quietly, "There's one more question I want to ask, Martin. And you'd better tell me the truth. Did Brackham put you up to this?"

"Brackham! Why should he? This proves he killed his wife."

Payson shook his head. "Quite to the contrary. You've provided him with an absolute alibi. According to you the murder took place at ten minutes of five and that corresponds with the time shown on Betty Brackham's broken wrist-watch. But a watch can be broken purposely and the hands arranged to suit the killer. That's what we suspected Brackham of doing, but our theory won't hold water any longer. Brackham was at a board meeting between four and five-thirty. He's got at least a dozen witnesses to prove it. Sound business men. Solid citizens. If your story is true, it puts him in the clear. Do you want to change it, Martin?"

Martin licked dry lips. "I can't. It's the truth."

Payson shrugged. "Maybe you think it is, but one thing's for sure, whoever you heard that day, it wasn't Charles Brackham."

Payson left then and Martin was alone. He dug around in the pantry until he found a bottle of rye and poured himself a stiff shot. He gulped it down and slumped into

the leather armchair to think.

He'd heard the quarrel and Betty Brackham's choked-off scream. The memory was too clear for an hallucination. Betty's voice had been high-pitched with fear but easily recognizable. The man's voice had been familiar too. The slow drawl, the mocking intonations he'd heard many times before. He'd been sure that it was Brackham speaking because that was the voice he'd expected to hear. But come to think of it, Brackham's speech was more clipped. Even in anger, it was cold but not mocking.

The truth came to him with a shudder that jerked him upright in his chair. Of course the voice was familiar. He remembered the words now: "Everybody knows I'm a lousy business man." Charles Brackham wouldn't say that, but it was the boast of Martin's best friend.

He started to stumble to his feet and fell back in the chair. He hadn't heard the door open, hadn't heard a sound, but Nathan was

leaning against the wall only a few feet from him, a black-snouted revolver in his hand.

A rueful smile twisted Nathan's lips. "I hate to do this, Marty boy. I really do. But you know me, always a sucker. I let Brackham con me into chilling that shrew of his for a measly two grand, when I should have got double the price."

"I won't tell, Nathan. Honest.

Nathan shook his head sadly. "That's what I tried to sell Brackham but he wouldn't listen. He said sooner or later you'd work things out and spill to the cops. You know something else, he's not even paying me for this job. He says its for my own protection. So I got to plug you for nothing."

Martin couldn't answer. Not even when he saw the slow pull of Nathan's finger on the trigger and felt something like a giant fist slamming him against the back of the chair.

But he could still hear Nathan's mocking voice. "It's a rotten deal, Marty. But, like I always say, I'm a lousy business man."



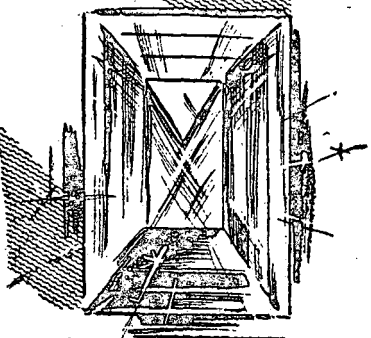
Those cunning Florentines have produced, among other things: Dante; the Medicis; poison rings and ditto daggers; and, last but not least, fine jewelry, for which they are justly famous.

sonally. Immediately. Although," he could not help adding, in spite of his training in forbearance where the public was concerned, "it *does* seem unlikely to me, I must admit. Extremely unlikely." He

Those Cunning

IF IT is an emerald," said Signor Gozzoli with the air of a man who has virtuously discharged a boring duty, "I suppose someone will want to do something about it. The attendant in the Chapel sent me to you."

"And rightly so," said Andrea Cantini, police officer *prima classe* in the *questura* of Florence. "We are grateful that you have drawn the matter to our attention, Signor Gozzoli. I shall look into it per-



By
JAMES HOLDING

robbed this remark of any suggestion of offense by smiling at his visitor, with a crooked lifting of one corner of his mouth.

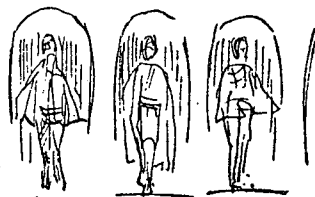
"I don't in the least blame you for being skeptical," said Gozzoli, also smiling. "It *is* unlikely. But you know, Signor Cantini, I have a theory about that."

"So?"

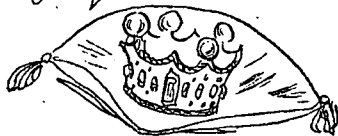
"Yes. It is my belief that in many instances, the unlikely possibility turns out to be the true one. We all too frequently overlook the

he wore. He gathered up his camera, binoculars and guide-book. In his warm friendly voice he said cheerfully, "I'm sorry if I've caused you more than the usual trouble you expect from tourists, Signor, but I thought I ought to report it." He shook hands with Cantini and turned toward the door.

"*Mille grazie,*" Cantini said. He



Florentines



truth, simply because it seems so unlikely. This is a case in point. I noticed a sunbeam striking that jewel in a certain slanting way. It looked, for a moment, as though the jewel were not green glass but a genuine emerald, unlikely as that might seem. So I drew it to the attention of the Chapel attendant. And here I am." He spread his hands in a Neapolitan gesture and arose from his chair, a spare, quietly dressed man with a luxuriant sandy mustache, neatly trimmed, and candid blue eyes that were slightly magnified by the spectacles

grinned, a trifle indulgently, at Gozzoli's back. He was quite accustomed to all kinds of cranks, but this one was refreshingly different. "Wait," he said on impulse, "if you will leave me your address or telephone number in Florence, Signor Gozzoli, I'll let you know what I find out. I'm sure you'll be interested to hear whether you were right or wrong about the emerald. And whether . . ." he smiled his crooked smile again, engagingly . . . "the most unlikely

possibility proves to be the true one in this instance."

Gozzoli paused at the door. "That's very thoughtful of you," he said. "I'll naturally be interested. I'm staying at the Minerva Hotel, next to Santa Maria Novella. Good-bye, Signor."

He went out.

Cantini sighed and reached for his hat.

He walked from headquarters to the Church of San Lorenzo, feeling the blessed warmth of the Tuscan sunshine on his shoulders. He went down Canto di Nelli, beside the church, picked his way through the voluble crowds of Florentines who were buying everything from crocheted gloves to screw drivers at the open air stalls in the Piazza Madonna, and entered the crypt of the Medici Chapel behind the church. Ducking under the low arches, he found the stairway to the Chapel of the Princes and ascended it briskly.

When he came out on the tessellated floor of the Chapel, he paused momentarily, filled with the pride that every Florentine takes in his city's artistic heritage. He gazed around him at the lofty octagonal chamber sheathed in precious marble—a splendid room housing the tombs of six of the Medici Grand

Dukes. He crossed the floor to the sarcophagus of Ferdinand II, for this was the one specified by Signor Gozzoli.

It was placed in a niche in the wall, high above the floor. On its massive top, carved out of granite and richly decorated, was a wide cushion. And on this stone cushion, directly at the feet of a larger-than-life statue of the Grand Duke, lay a replica of the Duke's crown, gilded and set with chunks of crystal and colored glass. At the front of the crown, in its exact center, was set a large rectangular green stone, perhaps two inches long in its widest dimension and an inch high. This was the stone that Signor Gozzoli had thought looked real. It was twenty feet above Cantini's head. And to him, it looked merely very small and very green.

He went over to the Chapel attendant who was selling postcards and colored prints to tourists. He called him aside.

"You sent me another crank, Giovanni," he said to the attendant.

The man flashed a smile. "The craziest one yet," he said.

"True. Tell me about it."

"What is there to tell? Didn't he tell you himself, *investigatore*?" The man always called Cantini *investigatore*, detective, to tease him and Cantini did not object since Giovanni was his wife's cousin.

"Did you observe him come in?"

"I did. It was early, just after the Chapel opened. He came up the stairs and went into the sacristy with his camera and guide-book, just like any other tourist; he stayed there for a time, maybe fifteen minutes, and then came out again and began to look at this Chapel. I saw him admiring the Ferdinand over there . . ." the guard waved a hand . . . "and then he lifted his binoculars and took a good look through them at the Duke's crown. Then he came over to me."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Signor, it reports in my guide-book here that the jewels in these crowns that rest on the tombs of the Dukes are merely colored glass and crystal. Is that right?' I told him it was. Then he says he thinks the green jewel in Duke Ferdinand's crown, the one right in front, is not green glass at all, but a genuine emerald."

"And you laughed at him, I suppose," Cantini said.

"Of course, the fool. I assured him he was mistaken. I even went over with him to take a closer look through his glasses at the crown. He seemed a nice fellow, in spite of being *poco matto*, a little crazy. I tried to be polite."

Cantini nodded. "And did *you* think the green stone looked like

glass or emerald?"

Giovanni laughed. "It's no different from all the other glass jewels in the Dukes' crowns in this room," he said. "I told him so, too. But he still thought that one particular piece of glass looked different. He said he'd been a jeweler at one time and knew something about jewels. So I sent him to you."

"A jeweler!" Cantini said. "Why didn't you say so?"

With some justice, the guard replied, "I did."

"He didn't mention that to me," Cantini said. "Get me a ladder, Giovanni."

"A ladder? Are you mad, *investigatore*? There's no ladder nearer than the crypt. And it's the middle of the day. Look at the crowd around my postcard booth! I can't leave to get a ladder now."

"Get it," Cantini said. "I'll take the responsibility for your absence. We must look at Duke Ferdinand's crown at close range."

Signor Gozzoli had scarcely got back to his hotel room after dinner that evening when he received a telephone call from officer Cantini.

"Who did you say?" asked Gozzoli somewhat blankly when Cantini gave his name.

Cantini repeated his name. "You talked to me this morning at the *questura*," he reminded Gozzoli. "About the green stone in Duke Ferdinand's crown."

"Ah, yes, now I remember. Your pardon, Signor Cantini. I have been engaged this afternoon in enjoying a most thrilling panorama, the view of Florence from Villa Mercede on Bellosguardo. Magnificent! Everything else left my mind. I apologize."

"*Niente*," said Cantini. "I have news for you about the emerald in Ferdinand's crown."

Gozzoli laughed. "Don't tell me. I was wrong, I know. But in that slanting sunbeam, it really looked genuine to me. So the unlikeliest possibility was *not* the true one, this time, eh? Ah, well, there are exceptions to everything, I suppose, even theories. It is kind of you to call me, however, Signor."

"You weren't wrong about the emerald," Cantini said, obscurely pleased at being able to give satisfaction to this discriminating tourist from Naples. "You were right."

"You are joking!" Gozzoli was surprised and pleased. There was no doubt of that from the way his voice rose and soared in the telephone receiver.

"It is not a joke, Signor. Can you come to my office for a few min-

utes? I'll tell you all about it."

"Now?"

"If you are not engaged."

"I'll be there in ten minutes,"

Gozzoli said in an excited tone.

"Good," said Cantini. "I'll expect you. Walk right in. We've only a skeleton staff here at night, you understand. But you know where my office is."

Gozzoli was as good as his word. Nine minutes later, he walked into Cantini's office, looking as small, neat and scholarly as he had in the morning. He shook hands and sat down in a chair that faced Cantini's desk. "Were you serious?" he asked immediately. "The green stone in the crown is a real emerald?"

Cantini smiled his crooked smile. "It was a real emerald indeed," he said. "And a rather special one, at that." He savored for a moment Gozzoli's obvious impatience to hear the details. Then he said, "You didn't tell me this morning you had been a jeweler, Signor Gozzoli."

Gozzoli shrugged. "There was no need. You promised to investigate the green stone. That's all I came about. But tell me, what about it, that emerald?"

Cantini offered his visitor a cigarette and was refused. He lit one

for himself. "I went to the Chapel immediately after you left me this morning," he began. "I got a ladder and inspected the jewel you indicated in Duke Ferdinand's crown. I couldn't myself tell if it was genuine, even from close up, for it is square-cut and flat on top and so very large at close range that one thinks it *has* to be glass, do you understand?"

Gozzoli nodded. "Too big to be real," he agreed. "The layman's natural reaction."

"But," Cantini continued, "there were scratches, dents and scorings in the crown around the green stone that ought not to have been there, in the setting of the stone. It looked as though an amateur had been at it, for the green stone was very imperfectly placed in its mounting . . . not at all like the other jewels in the crown. So I called in an expert."

"Very wise," Gozzoli said. "I myself know how difficult it is to distinguish false from genuine when it comes to gems."

"Yes. The lapidary I called in stated that there was no possible doubt the emerald was genuine. But it had been forced into its setting by a rank bungler."

Gozzoli smiled. "The proper mounting of jewels is a fine art known to very few, unfortunately. And then what?"

"I had my lapidary remove the genuine emerald and replace it with the original piece of green glass which we ultimately found lying loose behind the statue of Ferdinand in the niche. Hidden from view, of course."

"Splendid! And you got the genuine emerald out of the setting without injuring it?"

"He's an excellent lapidary," said Cantini, "and he was very careful. I asked him to be, because there was a perfectly defined thumb print on the flat top facet of the emerald, and I wanted it preserved, you can understand why."

"How intriguing," Gozzoli exclaimed. "I suppose you thought the fingerprint might be that of the man who had substituted the real stone for the glass one, eh?"

"Exactly. And it was."

"How can you know that?"

Cantini lifted the corner of his lip in his appealing smile. "Because it's the most *likely* possibility," he said gently. "The converse of your theory. We have the thumb print in our files. Every *questura* in Italy has it. It's the thumb print of one of our most sought-after criminals, Signor. We want him for everything from armed robbery to murder. To our shame, a Florentine. Vincente Carlo."

"Carlo! I've heard of him, I believe."

"Everyone has, Signor. He's famous . . . or infamous, rather . . . all over Europe. A true malefactor. But for two years we have heard nothing of him. We have hoped he was dead, or that he'd emigrated to some other country. But today, on that emerald in the Chapel, we find this thumb print! It seems evident, does it not, that he is the man who set the real jewel in the place of the glass one?"

Gozzoli's blue eyes behind the magnifying spectacles were puzzled. "But why?" he asked. "Why would he do such a foolish and difficult thing?"

Cantini tilted back in his chair and put out his cigarette. He shrugged. "We can but guess," he said slowly. "Let us say this Carlo has a huge, enormously valuable emerald in his possession. Knowing Carlo, we may be sure that he did not come by it honestly. It is too large, this emerald, too valuable, perhaps too well known throughout the channels usually utilized by him. So what must he do? He must find a private and specific market for that jewel himself before he can hope to get full value for it. An unscrupulous collector, perhaps, or a gem-cutter who can break up the emerald into a number of smaller but still priceless gems, eh? To find such a market for his stolen emerald, this

takes time . . . time he doesn't have."

"Ah," said Gozzoli softly. "I begin to see it, now."

"Yes. So Carlo wishes to deposit his emerald in a secure hiding place where it can rest undisturbed, beyond any possibility of discovery, until he has located a buyer for it."

Gozzoli broke in, "There was an American who wrote a *giallo* once about a letter that was hidden in full view . . ."

Cantini nodded. "Remember Carlo is a Florentine. He knows the city like the back of his hand. He knows the Medici Chapel, the Chapel of the Princes. So he hides his emerald in Duke Ferdinand's crown in full view of a million tourists, but so high above their heads that the chances are infinitesimal anyone will ever tumble to his trick."

Gozzoli said in reluctant admiration, "Rather clever, in a depraved animal way, eh? But he reckoned without a stray beam of sunshine and an ex-jeweler."

"Oh, yes, clever enough. His emerald would be patiently awaiting Carlo's return for it, safe and sound exactly where he left it, if it hadn't been for you."

Gozzoli was modest. "A fortunate accident, Signor. Nothing more. Plus a desire to test out my theory of the most unlikely pos-

sibility being true once again."

"The police of Florence are grateful for your theory, at all events," Cantini grinned. "We shall now, thanks to that theory, be ready and waiting for Vincente Carlo when he returns to take his emerald back. We have been wanting to lay hands on him for seven years."

"He must be very elusive," Gozzoli said. "How could he place his jewel in the Duke's crown without discovery in a public place like the Chapel, with hundreds of tourists about? Even that defeats my imagination."

"That part of it could have been comparatively simple."

"Simple?"

"Two years ago, a crew of plasterers and painters were working in the new Sacristy that opens off the Chapel of the Princes. The room you saw this morning that contains Michelangelo's sculptures. These workmen . . ."

"Two years ago?" Gozzoli interrupted. "But surely . . ."

"The time element is interesting," Cantini said, "in connection with another fact I shall give you shortly. These workmen, as I say, had ladders and scaffolding to work on, and left them overnight in the sacristy each day while they were on the job there. This I have just found out this afternoon by

checking back to verify it."

"You have been busy, I can see that."

"Yes. It seems clear that Vincente Carlo must have visited the Chapel at that time, seen the workmen's ladders, and conceived his brilliant idea for hiding the emerald."

"But how, I must ask you? How could he do it without drawing attention?"

"He stayed in the Chapel overnight, we believe. Hid behind the altar or in one of the reliquary alcoves, perhaps, until tourists, workmen and attendants had gone for the night and the Chapel had been locked up. Then he merely borrowed a workman's ladder from the sacristy and proceeded to replace the glass crown jewel with his own emerald. He was clumsy about it, as the scratched setting testifies. And careless, to leave a thumb print. But the job was adequate. He replaced the ladder, passed the night in the Chapel, and when it re-opened in the morning, probably walked out with the first batch of departing tourists."

"Dio!" Gozzoli breathed. "A clever man. But if a ladder is absolutely essential to reach the Duke's crown, it poses a pretty problem for Signor Carlo when he returns for his emerald, does it not? He can't count on a workman's ladder being handy then."

Cantini said with confidence, "Yes, but do not doubt for a moment that he would solve that problem in some way or other. He has solved tougher ones than that. Now, however, he will not need to. We have anticipated him."

"What was the other fact you promised me?" asked Gozzoli curiously.

Cantini regarded him smilingly. "I was saving best news for last," he said. "You have not only discovered an emerald, my friend, but, as I told you earlier, a very special one." He turned toward a small safe that stood in one corner of his office. "I have it here. Would you care to see it? Since you were at one time a jeweler yourself?"

"I'd like nothing better," said Gozzoli eagerly. "A special emerald, you say?"

Cantini twisted the combination of the safe, opened the door, reached in a hand and brought out a nest of absorbent cotton in which lay the emerald, like a burnished green valley between snowy hills. He placed it on his desk.

Gozzoli leaned forward in his chair to look. "What a beauty!" he said in an emotion-charged voice. "How utterly lovely!"

Cantini sat down again and leaned back. "Do you recognize it?" he asked expectantly.

"No, I don't. Should I?"

"I thought you might," said Cantini, "since it is the Panton emerald."

Gozzoli's eyes rounded in astonishment. "The Panton!" He leaned closer to the emerald. "I have seen photographs of it, of course, but never the real article. Le Comte de Panton owns it, doesn't he?"

"Yes. But it was stolen from him two years ago, at exactly the same time the painters were working in the sacristy of the Medici Chapel here. Now do you see the significance of the time element? Two years ago it was stolen. Today it turns up. My lapidary recognized it at once when he removed it from the crown today. I telephoned to Paris immediately, you may be sure. The Paris police were delighted. I am requested to tender you their warm thanks."

Gozzoli, still staring fascinated at the emerald, said nothing. Cantini sprung his surprise. "I am also requested to inform you, Signor Gozzoli, that you, and you alone, will receive the generous reward offered by Panton's insurance company for news leading to the recovery of the emerald."

Cantini lit another cigarette and puffed it, watching to see how Gozzoli would take this bit of good news.

"A reward!" Gozzoli exclaimed. His eyes brightened. "How much?"

"Generous," said Cantini, drawing out the suspense. "Extremely generous."

"How much, man?"

Cantini capitulated, smiling. "Half a million lira."

Gozzoli's face fell. "Only half a million?"

"Half a million I would call handsome," said Cantini, frowning.

Gozzoli said, "As a one-time jeweler, I know that this emerald is worth more than a hundred times that amount. Half a million is niggardly."

Cantini was dumfounded. He had looked for any reaction but this.

Gozzoli stared through his spectacles at the emerald on the desk. The electric light in the room caused a thousand rich green sparks to dance and flicker in the gem. "No," he said in a determined voice. "No, Signor, I will not accept this reward. I absolutely refuse."

"But why?" cried Cantini. "It's a wonderful windfall. And you deserve it."

Gozzoli shook his head stubbornly. "No," he said. He reached inside his neatly tailored jacket. "I'd rather have the emerald, I think."

The gun he was pointing at Cantini had a silencer on it.

Cantini gaped at him stupidly. The big old-fashioned clock on the office wall ticked with more

than its usual loudness in the silence.

"I haven't been quite fair with you, Signor Cantini," said Gozzoli, standing up and reaching for the emerald on the desk. "Traveling under an assumed name; wearing blue contact lenses over brown eyes behind magnifying spectacles; and sporting a big mustache on my usually naked lip. But I must thank you, all the same, for your cooperation. You have been most kind."

He put the emerald carelessly in his pocket, leaving the cotton on the desk. The snout of the gun did not waver.

Cantini found his voice. "You are Vincente Carlo?"

Gozzoli bowed. "In the flesh. And this emerald belongs to me, as the thumbprint you found on it proves."

"You stole it . . ." Cantini began, but Gozzoli interrupted him.

"Of course I stole it. And your reconstruction of how I hid it in the Medici Chapel was admirable, believe me. I am sorry to disappoint you like this. But you said yourself just now that I would surely find a way to solve my little problem of getting the emerald back, even if a ladder wasn't handy."

"I was your ladder," Cantini said.

Gozzoli nodded. "And a thousand thanks for it. I'm leaving for Rome in ten minutes. From Rome,

I shall take off for New York before daylight. My customer is waiting there for the Pantan emerald, and will pay me what it's worth."

Although Cantini had no illusions about Vincente Carlo, he said, "You won't get out of this building, Carlo."

The small neat man grinned at him. "I think I will," he said. "Who knows who I really am? Only you. Who knows I am here at this moment? Only you. Who would guess I am leaving with an emerald in my pocket? Only you." He looked at the silencer on his gun.

Then he laughed, a hearty, unforced ripple of sound. "You would have done well to show more respect for my theory this morning," he said, still laughing. "Was I an innocent tourist, an ex-jeweler from Naples, who accidentally noticed what looked like a real emerald among a lot of glass ones, and reported it to you as my civic duty? Or was I a devious criminal who deliberately pointed out to you an emerald I already knew was genuine because I'd planted it there myself and wanted it back? Those were the possibilities that confronted you. And you foolishly chose the wrong one, merely because it was the likely one." He clicked his tongue deprecatingly against his teeth. "I'll give you one more chance. Here are the possibilities:

I'll escape to America with my emerald; or I'll be apprehended before I can leave this building. Which do you think the most unlikely?"

"The first," said Cantini, sitting very still. "But not the true one, this time. Look behind you."

Carlo was not to be drawn. He smiled contemptuously. "An ancient trick, my friend." He moved a step backward and his finger tightened on the trigger of his weapon. "I think we can now terminate this affair, *sciocco*."

His silenced gun belched softly.

But it is difficult to shoot straight with policemen hanging on one's arms. His bullet went into the floor.

Cantini stood up as his men disarmed and secured Vincente Carlo.

He said, "You may keep that emerald in your pocket to comfort you in prison, Carlo. It is, after all, only the original piece of glass from Ferdinand's crown. The Pantan emerald, which you kindly pointed out to us, has already departed for Paris by bonded messenger."

Carlo, held helpless by his captors, squirmed in their grip, his face a mask of fury.

Cantini's lip lifted in his engaging smile. "Your own theory could have saved you, Carlo," he said gently. "But you failed to take into account the unlikeliest possibility of all: that even a stupid policeman might be cleverer than you."



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WHEN they took Mr. Stein away yesterday, he was screaming. Not because of where they were taking him, or how . . . with his arms wrapped around him. He was screaming mad because they wouldn't let him finish his dart game.

They brought him down in my elevator car, non-stop from the top floor. As he went past me, he stopped yelling. He smiled that actor's smile of his and said to me, "Hold the car, Pancho. I'll be right back. Just taking time out from my dart game."

When I first came here to the Acme Building to run an elevator, I thought Mr. Stein was a swell guy. A little nutty, of course, but then you sort of expect that from these advertising men. Some days he'd cut up and joke with me, flirt with the girls in the car, and give out with his charm. Other times,

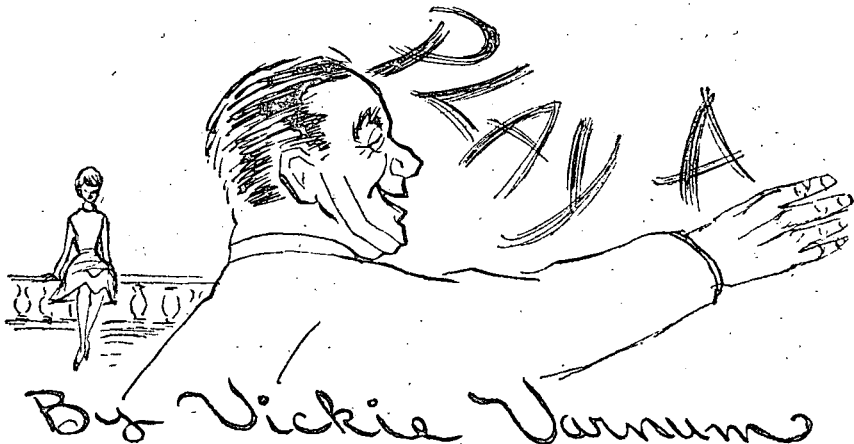
he'd be gloomy and frowning, wouldn't seem to notice me or anybody else.

I first got the idea that he was more than a little offbeat when I heard Mr. Burman, fourth floor, talking to his partner. It's funny how people will talk in front of an elevator operator as if he was just part of the equipment.

Mr. Burman said, "How about that Leo Stein? They say he's losing accounts even faster than he's losing his hair."

His partner, Mr. Billingsley, said, "Let's face it, Joe, who wants to do business with a prima donna? He's so damned impressed with his own genius that he puts on a *show*, instead of a sales presentation. He's a real ham, from way back."

As they got out on the ground floor, Mr. Burman was saying, "Don't be too hard on him, Bill.



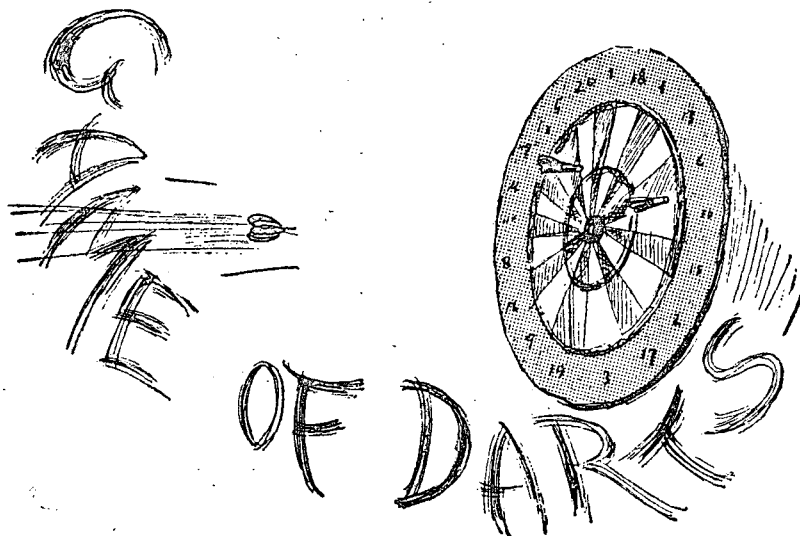
There are those who maintain that any competitive game is an outlet for aggressions which would otherwise be suppressed. Suppression, you know, is allegedly very, very damaging to all concerned.

I'm afraid the poor guy is sick. I mean *real* sick."

From then on, I pieced together a lot of information from what tenants and other people let drop when they were in the elevator. It seemed that Leo Stein had started out with a bang. He made a name for himself as a brilliant advertising man. He was temperamental, but everybody liked him pretty well. Then he got to depending on his charm and stopped being very serious about his work. He neglected

his clients, they said, and spent too much time chasing skirts. He made a pass at the secretary of one of his clients. It turned out she was ace-high with her boss, and when he heard about Stein's advances, he took his account elsewhere. Things like that have a way of getting around, and bad luck always snowballs, so it wasn't long before the Stein Agency began to lose business.

Even so, Mr. Stein never got to the office before noon. You'd think



he would work harder when business was slow, but not him. His office was always in an uproar, what with new help all the time. He hired or fired people every couple of weeks, it seemed. Only one gal, his secretary, Jane Curtis, stayed on, no matter who came or went. She knew more about his business than he did, people said. Maybe that's why he kept her on. I guess the main reason why she took his ranting and raving and sloppy business practice was that she was a widow with a little boy to support, and she needed her job.

One night I brought Jane down in the elevator. She looked as beat as an army drum. I made some remark about her being tired. She said, "Pancho, I just can't tell you how tired I am . . . and I have to come back later for a conference. It'll probably last until midnight. They usually do."

A few minutes later, Mr. Stein came down with Wilma, his new copy girl. She had already been there a month, longer than most, and it looked like they got along real well. As they went out the door, he was saying; "We'll have a nice leisurely dinner, Gorgeous. Good old Jane can hold the fort up there until we get back." They were both laughing as they left.

One afternoon soon after that, Mr. Stein was carrying a big flat

package when he got in the elevator. He smiled and said; "Come up and play a game of darts with me some day, Pancho. It's good exercise . . . and besides, it's fun."

The next day, I took a Special Delivery letter up to his office. When I handed it to Jane, I could see into his conference room. He was singing a song, and throwing darts at the board. They whacked into it like bullets, never missing a beat, as he kept time to the music. I could see Wilma over to one side, curled up on the couch like a blonde kitten, smiling up at him as if she thought he was pretty wonderful.

Yesterday, the way I heard it, Mr. Stein was playing darts again. He said; "It's getting stuffy in here. Let's take the dart board out on the balcony and get some air while we're playing. You, too, Jane . . . I've got a couple of letters I want to dictate between games. Bring a chair. Wilma, you can sit on the railing. The sun will do you good."

The top floor office opens out onto this balcony . . . a ten foot wide stretch of roof with a low railing around it. Because it's twenty floors above the ground, you can get a dandy view of the bay, and of the roof tops all around.

Jane said to me today, "When I got out there with my chair, he and Wilma were laughing about

some people sun-bathing on a roof across the way. The people didn't have much clothes on, and he got a bang out of that."

Then, she said, her boss began to play darts again. He was singing, of course. This time the song was "Old Black Magic". When he got to the part about "down and down I go, 'round and 'round I go," he stopped and laughed.

"I wonder," he said, "if things really do go 'round and 'round when they go down and down?"

He went back to throwing his darts, keeping time to the music. Just as he started the song over for the third time, Jane heard the telephone ring. She went inside, closed the door, and answered the phone. While she was talking, she thought she heard Wilma laughing. The door was closed, so she couldn't be sure. Just as she was finishing her conversation with the man on the phone, the door opened and Mr. Stein walked in. He was smiling.

He said, "Go out and get my dart board for me, will you, Jane? I've got the darts here, and I want

to play another game before lunch."

Well, Jane went out and started to take the dart board down off the wall, when she suddenly realized that Wilma wasn't around. The only way off the balcony is through the office door. Jane ran into the office. Mr. Stein was in his conference room, singing "Old Black Magic".

Jane had the dart board in her hand. She had a sick feeling inside, but she thought she must be wrong. She said to him, "Where's Wilma? I didn't see her on the roof."

Mr. Stein smiled as he reached out to take the board from her. He said; "Oh . . . Wilma. Too bad you missed the experiment, Jane. I found out that people really don't go 'round and 'round when they go down and down."

When the police came for him, he was thumping darts into the board, keeping time to his song. They say he didn't even glance at the blood splashes on the sidewalk, or the blanket-covered heap in the gutter. He was just screaming mad because they had interrupted his dart game.

HOSEMEN still chased wisps of smoke in the fifth floor apartment at one A.M. as Fire Marshal Ed Manning swung his light over the figure lying in the blackened ruin of the bed. Anger crawled up the back of his red head under the white helmet. Loss of life from fire was bad enough when due to human carelessness, but this poor guy hadn't died from smoking in bed.

Too much of the box spring was too evenly burned. Manning leaned closer, sniffing, trying not to be revulsed by the stench of overcooked flesh. From long experience he singled out and classified a faint, pungent odor.

"Barbecue starter fluid," he snapped. "It was poured all over the bed, and over him."

Sims, his elderly game-legged assistant, gestured toward a terrace beyond the jagged heap of a glass door that had been shattered by heat.

"There's a portable barbecue out there, and the boys found an empty



By Carl Henry Rathjen

Homo sapiens, in his early beginnings, relied upon fire for warmth, light, and protection. These basic qualities have not changed, but the uses to which it is sometimes put vary with the users, and are not always to their credit.



gallon can down in the alley. That's why I called you."

Manning nodded, grimly thinking of the sights he'd seen on the way up from the street. Dishevelled tenants roused from sleep. A woman with a leg broken from a fall down a murky stairway. Trampled, frightened, and smoke-sickened kids. All because of what had happened in this bedroom! Arson to conceal murder, and to hell with how many other people might become victims too!

"Did you notify the Homicide Squad?" he demanded.

"After I called you," Sims said reluctantly. "Look, Ed, we're not going to back off this, are we?" Sims, incapacitated for more active duty, hated his job as Fire Prevention Bureau Inspector, and too often tried to take out his bitterness on fire ordinance violators. Recently, on another arson case, he'd stepped on the toes of the Police Department and Manning had received a memo from the Old Man. Manning knew there wouldn't be a memo if *this* case weren't solved quickly. He'd be up on the carpet because there was a pyro in



jail, awaiting trial for a series of apartment and hotel fires. The suspect's bigshot lawyers would turn on the pressure, insisting that Manning had tracked down the wrong man.

"We'll cooperate with the Police Department," Manning said uneasily. He tilted his helmet toward the bed. "Have you found out anything about him?"

"His name is . . . was Burgess," Sims replied. "Lived here alone, a widower semi-retired from the hardware business now being run by his two married sons. I've sent for them. He attended a company banquet with them tonight, their wives were also along. As far as I've found out, they dropped Burgess at the curb about an hour ago, and didn't come up with him." He moved to worriedly face Manning. "If their alibis check out—"

"We, and the police will have to find someone else," Manning declared. "Got any more information on him?"

"He has a secretary, been with him in the business for about thirty years. She's been helping him write his memoirs, and has a key to the apartment. She was at the banquet too, but didn't ride in the same car."

Manning managed a slight smile. "You sound like an old gossip."

"I found one who lives in the

building. It helps on a case like this, Ed. I've been listening, too, to the Department grapevine about that pyro. If that case is pulled apart, we come unglued too."

"Get that secretary down here," Manning said grimly. He jerked his head around as the telephone rang in the partly burned living room. Brushing past hosemen and pulling out his handkerchief he called sharply to a battalion chief. "Leave it, I'll get it." He carefully picked up the handset. "Hello?"

"Well, at last," said a man's voice. "Sorry to disturb you at this hour, Mr. Burgess, but you're a hard man to catch. I've been trying all day and evening."

"Got tied up with a company banquet," Manning murmured. "Who is this, please?"

"I'm Frank Al—" There was a pause. "Are you Burgess?"

"He can't come to the phone at the moment," said Manning, making motions with his free hand. Sims dashed out to find another phone. "Who shall I say is calling? Mr. Frank—"

"Allenbeck. Why can't he come to the phone?"

"I'll take a message," Manning stalled.

"Are you his lawyer?"

"What's the message?" Manning persisted.

"Er . . . I'll call him back in

the morning." The line went dead, too soon to be traced. Manning hung up slowly. He told a downcast Sims to start a rundown on the name, Frank Allenbeck.

"It rings some kind of a bell," Sims muttered.

Manning nodded. "See if you can get it loud and clear." Lighting a cigarette he prowled the apartment until the Homicide Squad arrived. Cupping a hand for cigarette ash, unable to find any trays and too safety-conscious to flick ashes on the black sodden floor, he briefed Lieutenant Ricardo Torrey, a ponderous man with a jet black widow's peak and sleepy-lidded eyes.

"Burgess is too badly burned to tell whether he was stabbed, shot, or what when he was put on the bed fully clothed. The medical examiner will have to determine that with an autopsy. I'd say it was done by someone he knew."

"You would?" Torrey remarked.

Manning hesitated. Torrey was ordinarily a square-shooter, cooperative in arson cases, the toughest type of crime in which to secure evidence. He'd wanted to move slowly in that recent pyro arrest. He'd been getting pressure from high sources, and he had six kids to support. But Sims had stepped on his toes, which put Manning in a bad light as chief

of the Arson and Prevention bureau.

"I'm not trying to jump the gun," Manning explained carefully. "Outside of determining the originating spot and cause of the fire, I've made only a cursory examination. So far, I haven't found any indications of burglary." He saw Torrey's gaze slide toward the littered bedroom. "Just part of blacking down. The boys can't be neat when they've got a hot one to lick."

"That's the hell of it when I have to work with you," Torrey said. "You let everything burn up. Why don't you drop that butt and complete the job?"

"What do you want, a gift-wrapped case?" Manning demanded, smiling. He held up the stub of cigarette. "This might be a lead. No ashtrays. So whoever wanted to make it look like smoking in bed didn't know he was a non-smoker. Maybe that alibis his family."

"We'll see," said Torrey. His gaze swung toward the door as Sims came in with the police lab technicians. "Thanks for the cooperation, Ed. We'll get to work, from where you left off."

Manning looked him in the eye, and grinned as he said, "I'm a bachelor, Sims had a row with his wife, so we'll stay and help you get back to your family."

"I know better than to spell a nasty word," said Torrey. "I've got six kids. All right, Ed, we've both been eating grapes from the same grapevine. Let's not try to pick any sour ones."

The dead man's sons arrived. Their alibis, for themselves and their wives, checked out. Manning asked them about the name he'd heard on the telephone. Frank Allenbeck. He got a blank stare from one and a shake of the head from the other. Torrey sighed at the interruption and took over the questioning again.

"Your father's secretary, Miss Driscoll, left the banquet separately. Right? She also has a key to this apartment." Manning frowned, and offered Torrey a cigarette as a reminder that someone didn't know Burgess was a non-smoker. The Lieutenant went right on with his own line of thought. "Was there any hint of something more than a business relationship?"

The older son, the one with the thinning brown hair, glanced at his brother. "We'll be very frank, Lieutenant. Dad's been very lonely since Mother died three years ago. We thought it would help if he wrote his memoirs. It would be somewhat like re-living his life with her. There's been nothing outstanding or dramatic in his life—"

"Except tonight," Sims cut in.

The son winced. "We thought writing the book would help him, even though we realized it had no market value. Dad tried to point that out to us, but we said we wanted it for ourselves, and the grandchildren."

"You figured he was going to die soon?" Torrey inquired.

"Of course not," exclaimed the younger son. "He was healthy, had a lot of years ahead. We just wanted to snap him out of his blue funk."

"Miss Driscoll knew what was up then," Torrey suggested, "and she went along with the scheme. Just as a paid, loyal employee, would you say?"

"She was willing to do it without pay," said the older son, "but, of course, we wouldn't hear of that."

"Without pay," Torrey began knowingly. "An old man, well off financially, I take it. A lonely widower and—"

"For your information," said the younger son, "Dad had given us full ownership and control of the business. He'd set up trust funds for our children. He'd disposed of the bulk of his estate, to save taxes for us. There was nothing left in an amount to interest a designing woman, if that's what you have in mind."

"But enough," said Torrey, "to keep her comfortably."

"We even suggested that to Dad," said the older brother. "It would have dispelled his loneliness. He has . . . had a high regard for Miss Driscoll, which we all share, but he wasn't *that* interested."

Manning thrust his pack of cigarettes at Torrey. "Smoke?" he asked firmly. Torrey turned away as one of his detectives appeared in the doorway.

"A Miss Driscoll has just come up on the elevator."

"Send her in," said Torrey, then spoke to the sons. "I'll be in touch with you."

Reluctantly, they took the hint she was to be questioned privately.

Waiting for the secretary, Manning confronted Torrey.

"Are you forgetting Allenbeck?"

"I can't question him," Torrey retorted, "until we find him. Why don't you see what you can do in that direction, if you think it's a lead."

"I might just do that," Manning countered. "You know, pyros, after they make the touch-off, have a habit of coming back to watch the spectacle, or even pitch in and give the smoke-eaters a hand. They think it dulls suspicion. The same thing can apply to murder. Why couldn't Allenbeck have made that

phone call tonight to establish that he had no knowledge of what had happened to Burgess?"

Torrey didn't answer. He was facing the door.

"Miss Driscoll? Come in, please."

She was a slim, graying woman. Manning judged her to be in her fifties. Her neatly tailored suit didn't hide her figure too much. She gave a feeling of efficient reliability, and had a mature charm and grace which seems to heighten in some women in their middle years. Old Burgess must have been blinded by grief for his wife. Miss Driscoll glanced toward the bedroom, went rigid, then came on slowly, fighting a quiet battle with tears in her large gray-blue eyes.

She answered Torrey's questions, almost in a whisper.

"Miss?" Torrey wondered aloud.

"You never married?"

"No."

Manning saw color creep into her slightly hollowed cheeks. He moved closer.

"Miss Driscoll, do you know anything about a Frank Allenbeck?"

She looked at him distantly. "I'm not sure, but it seems—"

Sims came up on the other side of Torrey. "Thirty-odd years on one job," he said sharply. "You must have liked your boss."

Manning saw her color deepen.

"He was wonderful . . . to work for."

Torrey gave Sims a little nod. "In all that time, didn't Burgess ever remark about you're not getting married?"

"Of course," she murmured. "He always wanted to see his family . . . and his employees . . . happy, and getting the fullest enjoyment from life."

"He must have been a swell guy," Torrey commented. "I take it, Miss Driscoll, you never told him your *real* reason why you didn't marry. Not even after he became a widower?"

She closed her eyes, and a tear squeezed out. "He . . . he never guessed. I never gave him . . . reason to."

Manning could believe that. "Getting back to Frank Al—"

Torrey's voice slashed through. "You're sure you never gave Burgess any come-ons?"

"His sons did," Sims joined in. "And I'll bet they discussed it with you, too."

"Yes, but—"

"The old man turned you down," Torrey suggested. "So, maybe, with the fury of a woman scorned—" He gestured toward the gutted bedroom.

"Oh, no!" she cried.

Torrey hammered away. "You haven't told us one thing that

would provide you with an alibi for after that banquet tonight. You had a key to get into this apartment."

Manning cut in. "Do you smoke, Miss Driscoll?"

"No."

"I thought not. Neither did Burgess, did he?" She shook her head. "Was he a heavy drinker?" Another tearful shake. Manning turned to Torrey. "He couldn't have been smoking in bed. He couldn't have passed out from drinking. He was in good health, so we can rule out a heart attack. He was a big man, and she doesn't look as though she could have hauled his dead weight onto the bed and then—"

Torrey glowered at discussing a case in front of a suspect and Manning realized he'd overstepped himself. Torrey breathed hard.

"I'll conduct this part of the investigation, if you don't mind, Marshal. Why don't you confine yourself to the fire?"

"I'd be very happy to," Manning retorted. "The only trouble is, I can't separate it from human beings." He turned to Miss Driscoll. "This is as distasteful and embarrassing to us as it is to you. It's just something that can't be avoided under these circumstances. I'm sure you understand and want to assist us in getting to the bottom of all this."

"Of course. But not . . . that way."

"Miss Driscoll," Torrey said firmly, "under the circumstances, I'll have to question you further."

"Routinely," said Manning.

Torrey sighed. "Routinely, at Headquarters. I'm not charging or booking you, so if you decide to be uncooperative—"

"I'll go," she said, getting to her feet.

Torrey nodded to a detective at the doorway, then he turned to Manning. "Before you sound off, Ed, you've got to admit that so far she's our Number One suspect."

"Yours," Manning declared, a bit irked.

"All right, but we're both under pressure from you-know-where on another case. If we let anyone off too easily on this one, we're wide open for suggestions that we should have given as much benefit of doubt with that pyro."

"I've got enough evidence to convict him," Manning maintained. "What are you going to accomplish holding Miss Driscoll? It could be said we're making a scapegoat of her, while we let the real arsonist . . . maybe named Allenbeck . . . get away. If we don't find him, it might even be suggested that he pulled the other pyro's jobs. I wouldn't put anything past those shysters."

"You worry too much, Ed," said Torrey. "I'll have my Department looking for Allenbeck, of course. Now do we compare notes or not?"

"We'll cooperate," Manning muttered. Down on the sidewalk, before going to their respective Fire Department cars, he turned to Sims. "You certainly went out of your way to cooperate with him to make up for past performances."

"Why not, Ed?" Sims retorted. "If we don't hang this Burgess job on someone we're going to have a grapevine wrapped around our necks. What's this Driscoll dame to you anyway?"

"Nothing personal," Manning snapped. "She just reminds me of a lot of the people I saw on my way up to Burgess's apartment. An innocent victim." He unbuckled his turn-out, then remembered he'd pulled it on over his pajamas when Sims had summoned him from home earlier. "I'm going home to change. Meanwhile, see what *you* can find out about Allenbeck."

He was on his way downtown later when he overheard a battalion chief radio a request for an investigator. Manning responded to a trailer court. They'd spread canvas over the drunk who'd passed out on a bunkbed, while smoking. Not a burn on him. The

smoldering mattress had asphyxiated him. If smoke had been smelled sooner there might have been a chance to save him. Burgess hadn't been given a chance like that. Why? Who would want to kill a good-natured, generous old man? In most of the detective and mystery stories Manning had read, the victim was always someone with undesirable traits, hated by a lot of suspects. In this case, only Miss Driscoll *might* have had a motive. But Manning still couldn't buy it.

From Fire Headquarters he phoned the police. Torrey told him the medical examiner had found no evidence on the body of Burgess of any violence. The Lieutenant asked if Manning had seen the morning papers. The lawyers for the pyro on the other case were getting ready to find loopholes if there wasn't an arrest on this apartment fire.

"There's still a little leeway," he said. "I've still got sixty-odd hours left out of the seventy-two before I either book Miss Driscoll or release her."

"I'll cooperate that far," said Manning. "But let's find Allenbeck before then."

"It's spreading out, getting thin," Torrey growled. "There's no Frank Allenbeck in this town or the suburbs. I've also spoken to

Burgess' lawyer, since you told me Allenbeck said he would be in touch there today. The lawyer doesn't know anything about it, except that Burgess had made an appointment to be there tomorrow, or rather, this morning. Something to do with a deposition about an accident case he witnessed two weeks ago."

Manning hung up slowly. He felt certain now that Allenbeck was somewhere in *this* town. That phone call last night sounded more and more like an alibi so that Allenbeck could safely be in town, supposedly to see Burgess' lawyer this morning. But why? Manning turned to Sims.

"Call the papers, or use any way you can think of tracking it down. I want to know *where* Burgess witnessed an accident. Wait a minute. I've got smoke in my brain! His sons ought to know."

They did. Their father had seen a car go off a road and into a canyon. Despite his age, the old man had made his way down the treacherous precipice and tried to give first aid to the couple in the car. But they died. Their name was Faucks.

Sims echoed the name. "It's coming in loud and clear, Ed. Maybe I can save us a lot of time and long-distance phone calls since the Old Man isn't down here to okay

them yet. My wife reads all the scandal columns." He looked at the clock, and winced. "She won't be up yet, but here goes. Find me a pair of asbestos gloves to hold this phone."

Manning found a pretext to leave the office while Sims jawed on the phone. Sometimes there were advantages to being a bachelor. Sims stuck his head finally into the corridor.

"Ed!" he called. "Don't run out like that anymore. We don't really mean it. I guess I've been starting it ever since I got this game leg."

"Did you find out anything?" Manning inquired.

"Plenty. Where do I start? The Faucks couple had both been married before, both have grown children by the first marriages. Since their deaths, it looks like a no-holds-barred contest shaping up over which of the first families is going to get the big estate. It depends on who died last in that accident, who survived the other, he or she? Mrs. Faucks's name by her first marriage was . . . Allenbeck!"

Manning began to see a spark which had started a fire in the Burgess apartment. He looked at the clock. He couldn't sit around and wait for the Old Man or anything.

"I'll be over at Police Headquarters."

Before he went in, he got a pocketful of change, then stepped into a phone booth and called the surrogate's office up north. He took the stairs two at a time to Torrey's office.

"I've got the angle we've been looking for."

Torrey leaned back wearily. "I've been afraid you'd complicate things. It's looking worse for the Driscoll woman. We can't confirm anything about her alibi for last night, and believe me, Ed, we've tried. There's something about her . . . if she were a man you'd call it guts. The hell of it is, she's getting tired and confused, or guilty conscience is beginning to show through. Anyway, she's tangling herself up enough so we can't let go. Now what have you got to add to the mess?"

"Wait until I call up the heavy artillery. Let me use your phone." He dialed Fire Headquarters and asked for the Old Man. "Manning, Chief. Has Sims told you about that Burgess case?"

"Yes, Ed. How are you coming on it? I'm glad to hear you're co-operating with the Police Department."

Manning gritted his teeth and glanced at Torrey who pretended not to be eavesdropping. "Chief, you know how it is with arson cases. Damn hard to get evidence

that will hold in court. It's usually all been consumed in the fire. I think I've got our man tabbed, but I have a feeling he's a cool one. Grilling won't produce a confession. He'll have to be trapped. So, Chief, will you support me if I ask the police to release another suspect? Miss Driscoll?"

Torrey's startled gaze was as black as his hair. The Old Man's reply was a long time in coming. He was undoubtedly mentally reviewing Manning's record and judgment, plus thinking that there was enough hell in fire-fighting without arson.

"I'll back you up, Ed," he said. "Thanks, Chief." Manning turned to Torrey who looked as though he had words stacked for throwing. "Stay shut and listen." He started to tell about the Faucks' accident, but Torrey had been about to tell him when he came. "All right," Manning continued. "Now you phone the police who handled that accident. Find out two things from them. First, were there any other witnesses who went down in the canyon with Burgess? I doubt it. But if anyone should ask them, request them to pretend that there might have been. Second, find out if their accident report shows who died first, Mr. or Mrs. Faucks. I'll bet somebody slipped up on getting

that. If I'm wrong, I'll buy your six kids their next pairs of shoes."

"I'd like that," said Torrey. "but they'd prefer ice cream." He stared long and hard at Manning, then picked up the phone and dialed. When he hung up, he sighed. "I still buy shoes. I think I see how you're thinking. But you tell me," he smiled, "then if anything goes wrong I can say it was your idea."

"Thanks for the cooperation," Manning said dryly. "Look, if Burgess was supposedly the only one who could testify which of the Faucks survived the other, his testimony could have swung that big fortune to one first family or the other. I think Allenbeck saw him last night, found Burgess was going to say Mrs. Faucks died *before* her husband, maybe he tried to talk Burgess into swinging the fortune to the wife's side and when he couldn't . . . he killed Burgess."

Torrey pursed his lips. "He's probably guessed, or *knows*, that Burgess hasn't yet made any deposition to his lawyer about it."

Manning nodded. "That's why we've got to offer him some bait. We've got to let it out that Miss Driscoll was with Burgess down in that canyon."

Torrey groaned. "For gossakes, Ed!" He sat with eyes closed. "I wouldn't blame her if she turned us down. It's a big risk for her."

He opened his eyes. "For all of us."

"She loved the old guy," Manning reminded him quietly.

The papers that evening had a front-page story, not too prominently displayed, and not too obscured because there were expected repercussions from a prisoner pyromaniac's shysters. The story was also on radio and TV. Manning heard it in the bungalow directly opposite the one occupied by Miss Driscoll in the multi-unit court. The story simply stated that she had been released by the police for lack of evidence. She was free to come and go, though if she were needed to testify in the Faucks' accident case up north, then she would have to leave town in the company of a police matron.

Sims shook his head as he was about to slip out of the bungalow with a police officer after they had been relieved on the stake-out by Manning and Torrey. "I wouldn't fall for that. What does Allenbeck win if he sticks his neck in this noose?"

"We hope he doesn't suspect it," said Manning. "Keep quiet about it, and don't tell your wife."

"I told mine," said Torrey. "I also told her, Ed, that you almost bought our kids some shoes. She kissed me and told me to protect you."

Manning smiled and kept watch

on the walk between the bungalows. Fire marshals aren't armed. If it came to gunplay he knew he could rely on Torrey.

Until midnight, other tenants and their visitors going in and out made the stake-out tense. Then the night dragged, until dawn when the milkmen and newsboys arrived. During the morning there were canvassers and bill collectors, deliverymen. The stake-out watches changed with men disguised as plumbers, dry cleaner salesmen, or just Joe Citizen. Torrey shared the next night watch with Manning. Nothing happened. The same the following night.

"He's cagey, Ed," Torrey growled. "And a lot of other things. Did I tell you the ME figures he didn't use a weapon? Just socked Burgess unconscious, then burned him alive!" Torrey swore softly.

Manning stared across at Miss Driscoll's apartment. "This waiting must be hard on her. She can't stay away from work forever, in mourning. We've started this, now we can't drop it. We'll have to clean up this trap so he doesn't smell it."

"Don't tell me my business," said Torrey. "Just pass the word to your men to cooperate. I don't want them dashing out to be heroes."

Early the next afternoon, just

down the street from the bungalow court, there was a resounding automobile "crash" that resulted in a brawl with knives and guns, which weren't used effectively. Neighbors and bystanders nervously kept their distance, of course, until the police arrived . . . twenty minutes late! That evening the press, radio and TV all carried a furor about the shameful lack of police protection. A little item on the front page was almost lost with its out-of-town dateline. Mr. Faucks' children, by a previous marriage, expected to offer his will for probate in the next few days.

More visitors than usual came to the bungalow court that night. With the tenants, they discussed the disgraceful fracas down the street. Police and Fire Department cars burned, but tongues were bitten. The night finally settled down. Then dawn came. Another blank night. Manning, watching while Torrey slept, swore softly.

He blearily watched a milkman working up the court with a carrier tray. The man went on past Miss Driscoll's to units farther back. Manning relaxed, yawning, then snapped his jaw shut. This wasn't the same driver for that outfit as yesterday. He turned toward snoring Torrey. No, wait, maybe just a substitute milkman, and he'd ignored Miss Driscoll's,

hadn't he? In the dim light, Manning hadn't got a sharp look from concealment. But was there a resemblance to pictures of Frank Allenbeck which he and Torrey had been studying?

Coming back, the milkman paused to light a cigarette, but his



face was turned away from Manning. He came on with bottles clinking in his carrier, paused again, then grasped the neck of a capped bottle filled with colorless liquid. Suddenly setting down his carrier, he slipped the glowing cigarette under a rubber band about the neck of the bottle, then poised the container like a football as he turned toward the screen of Miss Driscoll's bedroom window.

Manning shouted. "Allenbeck! Hold it!" Yanking open the door, slamming it back against the wall, he charged out. Allenbeck whirled and hurled the bottle at him. It thumped Manning's chest, jolted his jaw, bobbled in his hands. Allenbeck sprinted toward the street, too much of a head start for Manning to wait for help from Torrey and other stake-outs. Dashing in pursuit he saw Allenbeck tugging out a gun. He slung the bottle. It staggered Allenbeck, then shattered against the wall. The glowing cigarette must have been lost somewhere in all the hurling. Allenbeck brought his gun up.

"Don't shoot, you fool!" Man-

ning warned, flinging himself aside.

The flash of the gun caught fumes from the broken bottle. A booming ball of flame enveloped Allenbeck. Manning grabbed a garden hose and tried to fight through the searing heat . . .

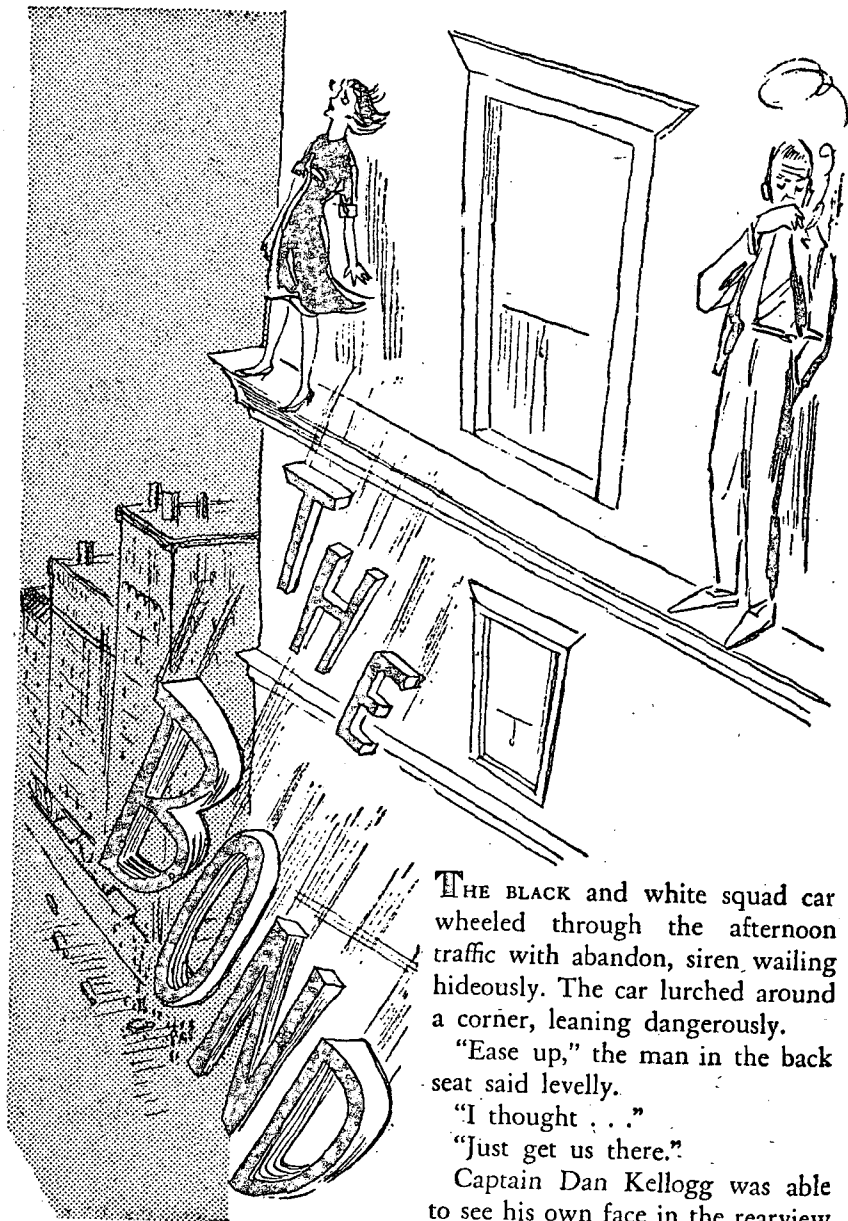
A few minutes later engine companies took over with the burning milk truck and smoldering bungalows. Torrey gritted his teeth as he and Manning stood by Allenbeck's cindered hulk.

"Two in one week is enough, Ed. Leave me out of your cases for a long time, will you?"

Manning looked down at the charred remains. "Maybe there's some kind of justice in this," he muttered, "but it's still a gruesome way for anyone to die." He looked up and saw Miss Driscoll peering from her doorway. There were tears in her eyes, unashamed tears. She managed a small smile as she beckoned to Manning and Torrey, the other members of the stake-out, the firemen and police.

"Come on," Manning said to Torrey. "I'll bet she makes coffee that has guts too."





THE BLACK and white squad car wheeled through the afternoon traffic with abandon, siren wailing hideously. The car lurched around a corner, leaning dangerously.

"Ease up," the man in the back seat said levelly.

"I thought . . ."

"Just get us there."

Captain Dan Kellogg was able to see his own face in the rearview

mirror. It was a long, ugly face with deeply etched lines, and at the moment, it was a tense face. He let the jaw muscles relax and the face softened slightly. *Again*, he thought. He had to be prepared. But he was not prepared at all. In a sense, he never was. He had been sipping a cup of coffee in the office, talking about Saturday's double-header, when the call came. The patrolman had summoned him over the intercom system.

"We've got one, Dan. We're holding a squad car for you."

He had reached the patrol car on the run, slamming the door as the wheels began to turn. Every moment counted now.

"When you get within six blocks, kill that siren," he said.

"Yes sir."

"How long has she been up there?"

"The Lieutenant said twenty minutes. It may have been more."

"All right." *Twenty minutes.* She was probably nearing the critical time. She was having doubts, growing more afraid of it or more determined, and *only she knew.*

BY
BOB
BRISTOW

"Captain Kellogg," the driver said, "what do you say to them?"

Dan Kellogg took a cigarette and flicked the lighter. His hand was almost steady and he inhaled the smoke before answering with another question. "What would you say?"

The patrolman shook his head, keeping his eyes on the approaching intersection. "I don't know. I couldn't do it."

The siren wailed. *I'm coming. Wait for me. Please wait.*

Perhaps he would fail. Perhaps it would be this time. Dan did not want to think of the possibility of failure. With determination he put it out of his mind for the moment.

One thinks of bonds as tying up something, such as money, in the stock-market sense, or a captive, as used here. Yet this bond is invisible, intangible, stronger than death.



The car was approaching the traffic congestion. A radio announcer had broadcast the news of the story and the curious public had rushed to the scene. This was going to be trouble.

"Kill the siren now, please," Dan said.

The squad car slowed and weaved through the cars.

Dan spotted a woman who stood looking down the block toward the building. She was holding the hand of a four-year-old child as though they had come to witness a circus act.

"I wonder *why*," Dan said sadly.

"Sir?"

"Nothing."

The car came to a stop a half block from the building.

"Do you have any orders, Captain?"

Dan Kellogg opened the door of the car. "Start clearing these people out of here. Send for help. I want every car gone in five minutes. Rope off this area for three blocks. Arrest anybody who resists. I mean that."

The driver reached for the microphone obediently, and Dan walked away through the tangled mass of cars. When he neared the building, he saw the firetruck, the ambulance, and two other squad cars. The officers, as well as the crowds of people, stood craning

their necks up toward the building.

Dan reached the squad car as a flashbulb popped in his face. He jerked his thumb angrily. "You," he said, "that's enough. Now get out."

"I'm from the *Daily News* . . ." Arrogantly.

"Lock him up," Dan said to the officer.

"You can't . . ."

"Get him *out* of here."

Dan had not allowed his eyes to seek the fourteenth floor. He spoke to the uniformed officer.

"Take this truck and the ambulance around the corner. I want it done in record time. Clear this area. You got that?"

"Yes, Captain." The officer was nodding, a big blonde Swede who Dan believed would get the job done.

"Has she moved in the last few minutes?"

"No, sir . . . she's been frozen there. Looking up at the sky."

And at that moment Dan let his eyes move up the side of the building. The woman was a small splash of red against the grey walls. The crimson dress fluttered in the breeze, her legs spread for balance, her back against the wall and her head stretched toward an almost cloudless sky.

"What are you going to do, Captain?" The reporter had come back.

"Share the view," Dan said softly. He walked across the street and entered the building. It was a hotel, a fashionable place. He imagined that she lived there. Not poor. It wasn't money. But then it never really was.

Are you ready, Dan? You've got to be, you know.

Dan moved hurriedly toward the elevator, aware that he picked up the hotel manager and a house detective. He did not hesitate for them.

"How do I get out there?" he asked the manager.

"The window. She climbed out the window."

"How wide is the ledge?"

"It's a foot or so."

Another patrolman stood at the elevator. Dan flipped his billfold, showing his credentials, then turned to the manager and the detective.

"Ride up with me."

The elevator moved swiftly.

"Who is she?"

"Miss Hanson. Susan Hanson," the manager said.

"How old?"

"Twenty-eight or nine. She might be . . ."

"What does she do?"

"She's an artist. She designs sets for musical productions. Something like that."

"She's not married?"

"Oh no . . . she's . . ."

"She's what?"

The elevator stopped, and in a moment the door opened automatically.

"She's rather plain," the manager said charitably.

Dan stepped out. A patrolman stood at the door of the apartment halfway down the long carpeted hallway.

"Come on," Dan said. He took large strides toward the door. "Do you know what might be bothering her?"

"No . . . she seemed very controlled. I had no idea . . ." The manager was growing breathless.

"Has she had a man?"

"Sir?"

"A man . . . coming here recently?"

"Well, we don't . . ."

"Just answer me. You know what's going on."

The manager turned to the house detective, a short, sharp-eyed Latin.

"Yeah, for a while. But I haven't seen him lately."

"Did he stay all night?"

"He stayed late, but not all night."

The manager frowned.

The patrolman stepped aside as Dan reached the door.

"What's your name?"

"Sergeant Devore."

"All right. Devore, I want this place kept empty and quiet. Anybody in there?"

"There's a couple of reporters and a preacher. And Lt. Mason."

"That's just fine," Dan said angrily.

He opened the door and pointed a stubby finger at the two reporters who were hovering about the open window.

"Okay . . . out."

"Hello, Kellogg," one of them said cheerfully.

Like a picnic. Hello, Kellogg.

"I'm not going to tell you again." His voice had dropped half an octave.

Lt. Mason pulled away from the window and saw him. His face was flushed and he was sweating. The large soft rear of the other man in the window appeared comical.

"That's the preacher?" Dan asked.

"Yes. She won't answer him."

Dan tapped the minister on the back. "Come on inside," he said evenly.

The minister was quoting scripture as he drew back inside. He was a young man with a round face from too many potatoes. "I think she's listening," he said.

"She is," Dan agreed. "Did she say she'd come back in?"

"She won't talk."

"Do you mind if I take over now?"

"I was reading from St. . . ."

"Do you mind? I'm going out there."

The minister blinked and glanced at Lt. Mason. He nodded slowly. "Certainly."

Dan moved and touched the window. "Everybody out. Mason, you take care of that, please."

In a few moments the room was empty. Dan looked about thoughtfully. He hesitated. *Can you do it, Dan? If it comes, can you?* He had an uncontrollable sense of inadequacy. He did not want to do this. *But he had no choice. None at all.*

The muscles of his stomach tightened as he pushed through the window. She stood ten feet away, moving her mouth soundlessly, her face upturned. Her eyes were closed.

Dan eased through the window silently, watching her closely, because he did not want to startle her. *Everything counted now. Everything.*

He stood on the ledge. It was probably fifteen inches wide. Immediately a queasy weakness crept through his body when he saw the tops of the cars a half dozen blocks away in the background. He made no attempt to move toward her. He slid away from her, to the

other side of the window, and drew in a deep breath. He unbuttoned his coat and reached for his cigarettes. The breeze was warm, not strong, and it was pleasant.

Dan slipped his hand into his pocket and took a cigarette. He put it in his mouth, but did not light it. He leaned against the wall casually, as though he might have been leaning against a lamp post waiting for a bus.

We are two people alone now. Isolated from the world. And so terribly hopeless. We have only each other. And eternity.

Dan spoke very softly. "Are you afraid, Susan?"

He watched her body stiffen as she turned her head, suddenly startled. His lips compressed the filter of the cigarette tensely. Her face was grotesque, like that of a gargoyle protruding ornamentally from the side of the building. The muscles of her neck were stretched taut.

Dan smiled. "Don't be afraid, Susan. Please."

"Don't come near me." Her mouth twisted horribly when she spoke. "I'm going to jump."

He let her settle a moment before he spoke again. A wave of emotion overwhelmed him. She was like a child, lost and bewildered, ready to plunge into the man-made canyon. Could she imagine

the agony this was causing him?

"I sent the cars away," he said. "They're almost all gone. I thought you'd want me to do that."

She looked down briefly and drew in a sudden breath. There was only the ambulance there. In a moment, it too would be moving out of sight.

"I'm going to do it," she said. "I have to get these last things thought out, but I'm going to do it. Don't preach to me."

"All right. But answer me, Susan. Are you afraid?"

"No." She shouted it.

"Be honest, Susan."

She turned her head and her fingers dug against the sandstone wall. Her eyes were desperate.

"Yes . . . yes. But I'm *going* to do it . . . I am . . ."

"Don't be afraid. That's the worst part."

"I'm going to. I *am*!"

"But not afraid. You don't want to die afraid."

She mouthed unintelligible words and her knees buckled momentarily. Her lips trembled uncontrollably as she spoke. "You're saying I'm a coward." She almost screamed it.

"No! Not about jumping. That's the easiest part. But I don't want you to die afraid of the other."

"You don't *know*."

"I *know*," he said softly.

She turned half away from him and her balance was not good. Dan thought she was going. He closed his eyes and slipped his hand into his pocket and found the lighter. He flicked the wheel and touched it to his cigarette. When he tasted the smoke he opened his eyes and she was still there. And his sense of momentary relief was so powerful that it almost staggered him.

"No matter what happens," he said gently, "wouldn't you like to talk to me first?"

"I think," she said more evenly than before, "that I'm going now."

"Please . . . not yet." His voice was controlled. But his heart had accelerated suddenly.

She studied his face for a long moment.

"You just stand there leaning as though . . ."

"I'm not afraid. *Not anymore*," he said.

"You won't try to stop me?" she said.

"Have I?"

"No."

"I won't do that. I understand, Susan. I *do* understand. I know that it isn't jumping at all. Those people who were watching think that, but they're wrong. They just don't know."

She was not pretty. The face was shaped poorly for beauty, but as

the eyes became less terrified, he sensed a softness there. A depth.

"You don't understand," she said, but without conviction.

"Yes. That's why I sent them away. They have no right to this moment. *This is ours.*"

"Ours," she repeated. She laughed and the laugh broke into a sob. *So very sad. So very desperate.*

"Susan, would you smoke a cigarette?"

"No . . . don't come near me." Sober again. Control now. Acute awareness.

Dan saw the fat woman in the window of the building across the street pointing excitedly. *People . . . so insensitive. Or were they really?*

"I'll bet she has something cooking," Dan said. "If we see smoke, we'll know it's burning."

"I hope it does."

There was the beginning of a smile, but it turned into a grimace and he saw hate there. *Wasn't it that way almost always? The ones who could hate deeply or could love deeply. So completely.*

"My name is Dan Kellogg," he said. "Dan Kellogg," he repeated it slowly. "I'm a special officer."

"What are you trying to do?" she asked.

He wondered if she was even aware that she was calmer.

"Share these moments. No matter what happens. These are important." There was a sadness in his voice.

"Yes, I was trying to be calm," she said.

"I want you to be calm. Do you know how I do it?"

"No . . ."

"Would you like to know?"

She glanced at him quickly. He had not moved. Leaning so relaxed against the wall smoking. He wondered if she believed it. And decided she did. When she did not answer him, he began thoughtfully.

"I think of those special moments that were good. Everybody has had them."

"You think I won't jump," she challenged.

"No . . . but if that happens, I want you to not be afraid. That's all I want right now."

He thought she accepted that. "Tell me," she said.

"I bring those moments back. Do you know what some of them are?"

"Tell me. But hurry."

Dan lowered his voice. "There were times before all the trouble. Before, I couldn't seem to handle it. A long time ago, I was a farm kid. Look at me. You can't imagine me a farm kid, I'll bet." He crushed the cigarette against the

wall and put the butt in his pocket, because she must not see anything falling . . . *falling* . . .

"Sometimes I'd walk down to this little pond we had and I'd stretch out and listen to the sounds. And let the sun go through me. Kick off my shoes and put my arms behind my head and—this may sound foolish—but I'd be so happy I'd lie there and laugh. At nothing really."

She was nodding her head.

"Did you ever do anything like that?" he asked.

"I didn't laugh. It was something like that, but I didn't laugh."

Dan bit down against his lip harshly. *They were so thoroughly alone. Groping for understanding. Seeking some few moments of tranquillity in this crazy, terrible world, before disaster.*

"And music," he said. His voice was even, but heavy with emotion, and she sensed it. She turned curiously, and he made no effort to control himself.

"There were moments that some melody would go through my mind. I remember walking along a street at night whistling some love song. And it made my heart . . . well, full. It didn't matter that the love affair ended very sadly. That happened many times, Susan. But—and this was strange—the love song was there, and even when it

was unhappy, the song was the thing. Do you understand, Susan?"

She shook her head.

"There is some almost mathematical scale behind it all. As though the deeper the sadness one can experience, the greater the joy one can have when everything is right. Doesn't this seem true?"

She nodded, and spoke wearily. "And it gets so terribly oppressive that it isn't worth it anymore."

"Yes . . . sometimes," he agreed.

"I feel better. You can go back. I think I'm ready."

"You loved him very much," Dan said.

"Yes."

"Susan . . . he ridiculed you, didn't he?"

She sobbed and removed one hand from the wall and covered her face. Dan leaned away and stood tensely, not drawing a breath, and waited until she turned and saw his outstretched hand. Then he let the hand drop to his side. *She did not know what it meant to him or why. But she would soon. He dreaded that moment.*

"I understand ridicule," he said. "But that wasn't why I surrendered. Not exactly. There isn't too much difference in us."

"He said terrible things," she said.

"He's a shallow fool, to be pitied. Is he an actor? Vain?"

"No. He was an artist. He used me. Then he didn't need me any longer."

"Tell me, Susan."

"He made me feel loved, and I believed him. It didn't seem possible that he could be deceiving me. It seemed so deep and genuine. He would repeat dozens of times that he loved me. Like a record going over and over."

"And you believed him."

"I asked him to marry me. I thought he couldn't quite say it. I told him about some work. I said we could do it together. He went to the producer and . . ."

"He did it alone."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"He said cruel things when he saw me. He laughed and . . . I don't think he knew how deeply I loved him. He didn't even suspect."

"And didn't know how valuable a thing he had," Dan said.

"It isn't self-pity. I just don't want to live anymore."

He had to decide about her. But hadn't he already? *She was not insane.* And because she had a mind, he had no real choice. He was committed.

"Mine was different," he said. "But the same, in a way."

"What do you mean?"

"When my time happened, Su-

san. I've been here, you know. That's how I understand. Would you like to hear about it?"

She did not answer. She studied his face thoughtfully.

"I was twenty-two. Eight years ago this spring. There was this kid . . . he went into a filling station one night and pulled a gun. Somebody saw him through the glass and I got the call. I was only five blocks away in a squad car. He was scooping the money in a hat when I got there, and I jumped out and saw his gun and drew mine . . ." Dan paused and closed his eyes, because he was seeing it again, and that feeling of despair was returning and growing stronger. "He turned, you see, and he was frightened. The gun was shaking in his hand and he made a movement and I fired. Maybe you know the rest. He died there, crying like a child. His gun wasn't loaded. The barrel was so fouled that it couldn't have fired anyway. Later, I found out that his father had been killed in a street accident. A hit-run thing.

"There were seven in the family . . . and the kid worked from sun-up to dark loading trucks, but he didn't make enough, and when he got desperate, he took the gun and bluffed his way into a robbery. There had been other things before that—many things, Susan, but this

was the thing that got me down."

Did she know? Could she feel what had happened to him?

His voice broke, but he pushed the words out. "It hit me hard, Susan. Day by day, my world fell apart. Finally I drove to a place in the country and got out of the car. I sat down and leaned against a tree. I took my revolver and cocked it and put it into my mouth. And . . . when I was waiting—you must believe this, Susan—an unexpected thing happened. A farmer who lived nearby appeared carrying a shotgun. He stopped and looked at me for a long time, and he said, 'Are you afraid?'"

Would she remember? Had his first words gotten through to her?

"He'd been in the war, Susan . . . and there had been a time when he thought he couldn't take any more. He understood what I was doing because he'd been there . . . just as I know how you feel now. He didn't preach. None of that. *He understood.*"

"It doesn't matter. I won't change."

"It matters to me. You are all that matters to me."

"I'm going now." She meant it. It was an electric moment.

"*And,*" he said evenly, powerfully, "*I'm going with you.*"

She turned, the muscles in her face drawn tightly. "What?"

"Because—and you have to understand this—that day in the woods, that farmer told me he was going to go with me if I did it. I made the decision for both of us." Dan took a step toward her, then hesitated. "*Susan, he meant it. I mean it too. If you go . . . I'll take your hand. But I insist that neither of us go in terror.*"

"You . . . you don't want . . ."

"No . . . I made it back. I have known many joys, Susan. There are so many."

"I don't believe you mean this."

He stepped toward her and his smile was one of surrender. "There is love," he said. "There is sadness. There is joy. And pain. But no one is alone in it. I will bear the pain with you. And the sadness. I will rejoice in your love and in your happiness. The time I have had this last eight years has been a gift, because I believed that farmer that day, just as you believe in me now. We are tied together by this. Your weakest hold to life is my weakest. And my courage . . . now . . . is your courage."

The street was empty below. There was a silence as he moved toward her. He was an instant away from eternity and he had put himself in her hands. He reached her side, but did not touch her at all. She looked up into his face.

"I'm prepared, Susan. You know

what I want of you. I'm not afraid to live. But I'm not afraid to die either. You must decide for us."

"Would you?" Her voice was low, incredulous.

He did not reply. He let her see it in his eyes. He let her see that moment with his back against the tree. The great love of which mankind is capable embodied in the farmer. And she did not doubt him any longer. He watched her close her eyes. She did not speak for more than a minute.

Then she shook her head slowly. "Please," she said, "help me."

He touched her hair. "I will." She searched his face and he watched the desperation leave her. "In triumph or despair," he said, "you will not be alone again." And the face smiled.

"I don't think I can walk," she said wearily.

He touched her hand gently. "I'll help you. Take my arm."

She nodded, and he slid his feet on the ledge. She followed slowly until they reached the window. He braced her as she turned and climbed inside. Dan followed and closed the window. She had slumped in a chair a few feet away. He lighted two cigarettes and slipped one between her fingers. He turned her face with his hand until she looked at him.

"I'm going to send you to the

hospital. You'll be able to avoid the reporters as much as possible there. But they may manage to talk to you. If they do . . . you understand you can't tell them about what we know. *Nothing at all.*"

"Yes."

"I'll be in touch with you. *Often.*" He ran his fingers along her face. "You'd like to meet the farmer, wouldn't you?"

She nodded.

"There are seven of us. Eight now, Susan. We meet twice a year. Once the decision was made, we've never had anyone fail us. We depend on each other. We depend on you now."

There were footsteps outside. Dan glanced at the door.

"Are you ready?"

"You took a terrible chance," she said, shakily, her lips trembling.

He did not answer her until he had gone to the door and beckoned the ambulance attendants to bring the stretcher.

"Because I couldn't afford not to," he said.

When the medics were ready to take her, Dan bent and kissed the corner of her mouth. Then she was gone.

Dan Kellogg stood alone and was deeply grateful. For the courage and dignity she had found in herself. For the gift that as yet she did not know she had given. He remembered the sun warming his body beside the lake. *And the laughter.* He remembered the song stirring in his heart when love was lost. *And the sadness.*

Dan Kellogg stubbed out his cigarette and went slowly to the door.

Dear Fans:

My desk is so weighed down with mail, requesting information about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club, I hope you won't mind if I reply in an open letter. Here are the particulars:

Membership dues are fifty cents which covers mailing costs and handling. (Please send coins or money orders, no stamps.) For this you will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, which will be issued four times a year. You can't imagine how rewarding it is to hear from so many loyal readers, and active, and incoming Fan Club members. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic interest.

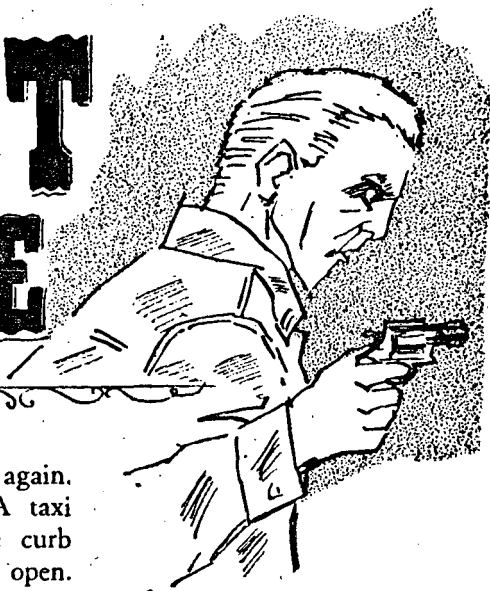
Most sincerely,
Pat Hitchcock
P.O. Box 434
Tarzana, California

ARTHUR ST. CLAIR left his seat before the curtain calls and made his way through the empty lobby. The audience was still clapping furiously as he came out into the damp air and looked about for his taxi. A mounted policeman holding traffic grinned down from the height of his horse. "What's the verdict? Hit

'Brooks Atkinson and Brooks Brothers.' He hadn't liked the label.

The taxi rumbled slowly through the growing theater traffic, but the cabby was silent during the ride. He had driven the critic to dozens of opening nights and knew the man's eccentricities well enough not to risk the loss of a tip. A few

EXIT LINE



or miss?" And he grinned again.

St. Clair ignored him. A taxi moved smoothly along the curb and the driver held the door open. "Evening, sir," he said. St. Clair climbed inside, then leaned back and fitted a cigarette into a holder. He was a tall, coldly handsome man wearing a Chesterfield and Homburg. A columnist had once described him as a combination of

minutes later, when they reached the newspaper building on West 40th Street, St. Clair handed over a dollar and moved purposefully across the pavement, through the revolving doors.

The Features department was on the second floor, a long, untidy room with a few tired men sitting around on tables drinking coffee. He nodded at them and went to his office near the elevator. It was an austere little room, its gray window decorated with a frieze of wet pigeons. The desk contained a typewriter, an ashtray, and the Strobl bust of Shaw. St. Clair removed his

coat and hat and carefully limbered up his fingers. Then, without hesitation, he began to type the review he had composed in his head on the way from the theater: *"'Enough Rope', which opened last night at the Carlton, has serious merit, but it is disastrously flawed by the performance of Jack Russo, a wild and uninhibited young man who has learned everything about the theater except how to act. Mr. Russo is one of the so-called Method Men, a mumbling Tarzan who swings from one emotion to another as though from a vine. He strikes me as nothing more than a drugstore cowboy, a fifth-carbon Brando, who sees the theater not as a cathedral, but as a cave where he may grunt and beat his chest . . ."*

St. Clair paused to light a ciga-



by William Link
and
Richard Levinson

In the theater, success or failure is very often a matter of timing, aside from the essentials of casting, direction, and lighting. It can be a fatal flaw, the lack of timing, as it was for one of our characters here.

rette and then looked up at the door. A young man stood in the entrance, watching him. He was short and squat, dressed in levis and a faded windbreaker, his trousers tucked in muddy leather boots. His flat, triangular face bloomed with a faint orange light that St. Clair recognized as makeup. The young man was obviously Jack Russo, and he must have run all the way from the theater to the newspaper office.

"Mr. St. Clair?" Yes, it was Russo all right. The same dull, brutish tones that had dropped like rocks under the proscenium arch. "I came to read your review."

"I'm afraid that's impossible. You'll have to buy a paper like everyone else."

"But I came all the way over here—first thing, you know?"

"I appreciate that, Mr. Russo, but I can't make any exceptions. I'm sorry."

Russo slowly cracked each finger on his right hand. "You know what I think? I think you just gave me a hatchet-job and you're too damn scared to let me see it."

St. Clair began to unroll the paper from the typewriter. "What I've written is none of your business until it hits the stands."

Russo suddenly snatched at the page. It tore, but he was left with the upper, crucial part. His small

eyes swooped over the paper, blinked rapidly as he began to read.

"Give me that!" said St. Clair angrily. He stepped forward, but the actor put up a restraining arm. It seemed as solid and muscled as a truckdriver's.

"Why you louse," Russo said slowly. His eyes flicked at the paper again, re-reading. "Were you *there*? Did you see me tonight? Or were you home in bed?"

St. Clair was unruffled. "That's my review, take it or leave it. Now I'll give you two minutes to get out of this building before I call the police."

Russo stared at him blankly, as if he had spoken from a distant planet. Then he slowly crumpled the paper into a small, hard ball and savagely hurled it at the desk. It glanced off Shaw's mouth and went rolling away on the bare floor. He looked at St. Clair, his face stiff, then he turned abruptly and went out.

St. Clair cleared his throat and lit a cigarette. Without bothering to retrieve the crumpled paper, he sat down at the desk and began to retype the review from memory.

The following noon he took a cab to Sardi's and was shown to his favorite table. He started to run his eye down the menu when he

had the vague feeling that someone was watching him. He lowered the large card and looked out over the bright dining area, immediately recognizing Jack Russo and a heavy older man seated near the entrance. Russo was glaring across at him while his companion, leaning close, seemed to be arguing in a low voice. A few moments later, Russo rose, threw down his napkin, and stalked out.

St. Clair relaxed, lighting a cigarette. He ordered and looked out again over the busy room, noting one or two Hollywood people and the usual gathering of tourists.

"Mr. St. Clair?"

Russo's companion was standing next to the table. Close-up, he was a surprisingly ugly man, his face blunted and veined. Dandruff powdered the lapels of his cheap business suit. St. Clair frowned at him. "Yes?"

"I'm Bert Lyons, sir. Jack Russo's agent and personal manager."

St. Clair grunted. "What can I do for you, Mr. Lyons?"

"I guess you haven't heard," he began awkwardly, "but Jack took your review pretty hard. I've never seen him like this before, he's like he's ready to blow up or something."

"That's too bad. If he can't face up to a bad notice he should be in some other business."

Lyons bent closer, and St. Clair had the distasteful feeling that the man was going to put a pleading hand on him. "Mr. St. Clair, I'm not sure that Jack's entirely in the wrong. I've seen some pretty tough reviews in my time, but that one was out of the ordinary. In a way, I don't blame him for blowing his stack. What have you got against him?"

The critic sighed. "Nothing personal. I just don't think your client can act. He's totally unbelievable. I hate to think of people spending good money to see a dramatics club amateur. Now if don't mind, I'd like to finish my coffee."

Lyons stared hard at the carpet. "Mr. St. Clair, if I could get to the real reason I wanted to talk to you . . . I was wondering . . ."

"Wondering what?"

"If maybe you could, well, apologize to Jack. Just tell him you didn't think he was right for this particular role."

St. Clair looked up, astonished. "Are you serious?"

"Well, I thought that might calm him down. Ever since last night he's been acting like a madman. He won't even listen to me any more."

St. Clair stood up and flung a bill on the table. "Good afternoon, Mr. Lyons. I advise you not to try anything like this again."

Lyons' voice was barely audible. "I'm sorry."

The critic hunted angrily for his coat-check. "For future reference—I don't write retractions. You can tell your client that."

He left Lyons at the table and retrieved his coat and hat from the girl.

Outside, snow was lightly falling on the canopy. "Cab, Mr. St. Clair?" the doorman asked.

He nodded. Then, suddenly, there was a sharp crack behind him, as if something heavy had fallen on the icy pavement. Russo was standing near the door, wearing a torn sheepskin jacket, his head bare. He had just dropped a stack of morning papers on the sidewalk. He jerked an arm at the column and defiantly cocked his head in a way that St. Clair mentally labeled as *vintage Rod Steiger*.

"See those?" Russo shouted, his breath exploding in the numbing air. "See them?" Several passers-by stopped to stare. "Eight reviews. All of them good—all of them *great*! Except one! You know who wrote the bad one? Huh? Answer me!"

A taxi angled in next to the curb and St. Clair moved quickly inside. But before it could pull away, the actor had pressed his face against the window. "You wrote

it!" the round mouth shouted. "What do you have against me?" The cold glass began to cloud, wiping Russo out, but the gray lips came clearly through. "*What?*"

A moment later the cab shot away and St. Clair looked back. Lyons had appeared from nowhere and was trying to pull Russo away from the traffic. The two men stumbled across the pavement with the drunken lurch of ice-skaters and St. Clair settled back in his seat.

That evening St. Clair gave a small dinner party at his apartment. It was a witty, candle-lit affair, the guest of honor a leonine English actor who had been recently knighted. The festivities ended around eleven, and St. Clair went downstairs to put his last guest in a cab. On the way back, in the empty elevator, he had a vague feeling of uneasiness. The Russo incident was still in the back of his mind, and he recalled the actor's hot face against the window, the suck of his lips on the glass.

As the elevator doors opened he had another feeling, sharper this time, as he saw he had left his apartment wide open. He went in and locked the door, double-chaining it. The long rooms were dimly lit, moving with blue shadows

from the falling snow outside. A few candles still burned on the dinner table among the discarded food and wine glasses.

St. Clair rubbed his eyes and decided to go to bed. He walked slowly through the living room toward the back chamber and then noticed, from the corner of his eye, that someone was sitting in the deep leather chair in the corner. He whirled around, staring at the wide pool of shadow surrounding the chair. Two trouser legs jutted out on the carpet, their owner wearing boots that glimmered damply with snow.

"Russo? Is that you?" He came closer and recognized the actor, slumped down in the chair, wearing the sheepskin coat.

"How did you get in here?"

The actor thought about this for a few moments, then mumbled tonelessly, "The door was open."

"Well, get out."

The eyes blinked dully. "Aren't you going to offer me a drink? Here I walked all the way from the Village and I'm wet and cold and tired and you won't even give me a drink. Now what kind of a host is that, Mr. St. Clair?"

The critic strode angrily to the door and jerked it open. "I want you to leave."

Russo slowly unfolded his bulk from the chair and got to his feet.

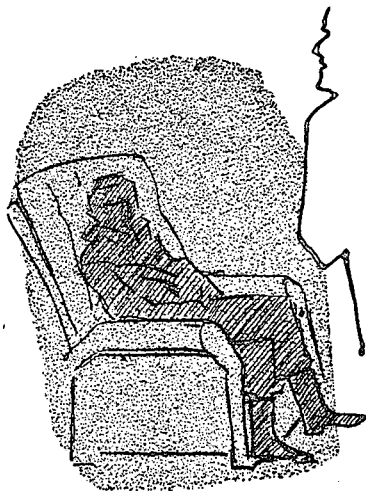
Now St. Clair could see that there was a faint, far-out smile on his face. Wavering slightly, the actor made his way to the dinner table and picked up a decanter of brandy. "I haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon," he said. "No, that's wrong. Correction. I had a hot dog at Redick's." He sloshed some of the liquor into a soiled glass. "What did *you* have to eat, Mr. St. Clair?"

The critic didn't answer.

Russo poked around the table. "I asked you a question," he said pleasantly. "What did you have to eat?"

"I told you to get out."

The actor peered at one of the dinner plates, sniffing at it. "Hors



d'oeuvres. Not bad. And what's that stuff on the little crackers? I'll bet that's caviar. Am I right, Mr. St. Clair? Isn't that caviar?"

The critic went to the telephone and picked up the receiver. But the line was dead; there was no sound of a dial tone. He looked down at the baseboard and saw that the wire had been brutally ripped from the wall. Russo closed the door and chained it. "I don't like telephones," he said. "They're an invasion of privacy. Don't you agree?"

St. Clair went toward the door. "I'm going to get the doorman," he said quietly.

Russo blocked his way. "But you can't leave now. I thought we were going to have a nice long talk."

St. Clair lunged at the door, tried to get it open. But Russo was there before him. The critic turned and headed quickly for the bedroom.

"Don't bother about that other phone in there," Russo called. "I took care of that one too."

St. Clair returned to the living room. Russo had pulled the chair in front of the door and was now comfortably seated, legs crossed, picking at a plate of hors d'oeuvres.

"What do you want from me?" St. Clair asked, wearily.

"Nothing. I want to talk, that's all. Let's have a good, old-fash-

ioned bull-session. I mean, it's not often a nobody actor like me gets to talk to one of New York's foremost theater critics."

"What do you want, Russo? A written retraction? An apology?"

"No." His face changed. "I don't want any of those things. I just want to fill you in on somebody's history. Mine."

St. Clair poured a glass of brandy from the decanter. The glass stopper tinkled faintly in the neck as he set it down.

"What's wrong?" Russo said. "You nervous or something?"

St. Clair took a deep swallow, felt the pleasant, radiating warmth. "I'm ready to hear your piece. Then I expect you to clear out."

Russo got up and came over to him. His voice was hard. "I'll clear out when I'm good and ready. Understand?"

St. Clair nodded. He could feel his face growing hot.

"I'll tell you something, friend. I might look young but I've been around. I started acting when I was twelve years old, all over the country. I didn't have any parents at the time and the theater became my home. You know what I mean?"

St. Clair nodded again.

"Say yes or no, Mr. Articulate Critic."

"Yes."

"Okay. So now you know I didn't make it in this business overnight. I've been acting all my life and it isn't easy. You know I flunked out of the Pasadena Playhouse? *Nobody* flunks out of there. But they taught me something I'll never forget. Guess what it was."

"I—I don't know."

"They said don't believe what anybody tells you about how good you are. That means teachers, friends, or even critics. Especially the critics. And you're not the first guy that knocked me, St. Clair."

His hand dipped into his coat pocket and brought out a small revolver. "You see this?"

St. Clair swallowed. The barrel pointed at his right eye.

"I've been saving it for one of you guys," Russo said quietly. "You know where I got it?"

"No."

"One of my best friends took his life with it. This is the same gun. He was an actor. He had a lot of personal problems, but the critics didn't help. I figure wherever he is tonight, he'll get a big kick when he sees what I'm going to do."

"You're—joking." The tendrils of brandy had turned cold in his stomach.

"Don't you wish I was? No, tonight's the night, St. Clair. You know why?"

The critic shook his head.

"Because you hate me. You probably wanted to be an actor yourself one day. But you didn't make it. You didn't have the talent or the guts. And that's why you try to destroy young guys like me. If you don't make it, nobody does. Well I'm not going to stand around while you write my obituary. I know right now that every time I open in this town you're going to get me. That's the kiss of death for an actor. Pretty soon producers get the idea and I stop getting parts in their plays."

St. Clair looked down at the gun. It seemed as smooth and guileless as a child's toy. He tried to be impassive, but he could feel his face going white.

"So maybe tonight we were fooling around with a gun and you had an accident. I mean, you got a little drunk at your dinner party, and the next thing—wham! It happens all the time."

St. Clair examined the man's eyes. They were very flat and steady, each one burning with a small pinpoint of light.

"What's wrong, St. Clair? All that caviar upset your stomach?" The gun inched closer.

The critic moved back across the table, his arm reaching behind him, scattering glasses. The man intended to kill him. If there was only

some weapon he could use . . . something to protect himself with.

"Why's your face so wet, St. Clair? I always thought critics made other people sweat."

His fingers, still reaching, touched the rough, diamond-cut edge of the liquor decanter.

"You're really scared, aren't you? Maybe I can put you out of your misery."

The critic swung the decanter, hitting Russo directly between the eyes. The actor blinked once, as a tiny red blister appeared on his forehead, then he fell solidly, bumping on the thick carpet.

St. Clair leaned over the table, almost physically sick. He stood there for a few minutes, still holding the glass decanter. Then he looked down at Russo. The actor lay at the foot of the table, his mouth open as if in heavy sleep. It suddenly occurred to St. Clair that the man had stopped breathing. He bent over him and opened the sheepskin jacket, felt inside the shirt. No, it couldn't be. He hadn't hit him that hard. But the chest

was still, not even a heartbeat.

St. Clair stood up, holding the little revolver in his hand, more confused than startled. What does one do when something like this happens? He supposed he should notify the police immediately. It meant going downstairs and using one of the pay phones. He was still standing over Russo when the doorbell rang, a bright tinkle that came again and again in waves.

Dazed, almost sleepwalking, St. Clair went to the door and unlocked it. Outside was Bert Lyons, his face bursting with a grin. With him were two newspaper reporters and a photographer who were trying not to look guilty.

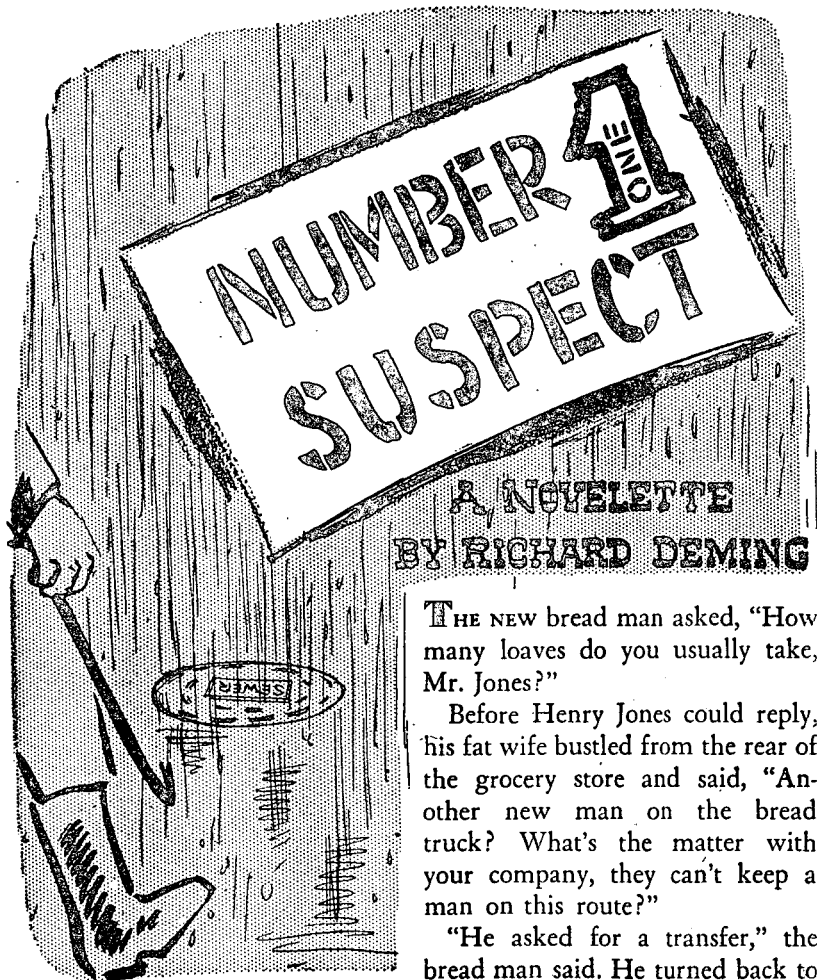
"Well?" Lyons cried. "Did he fool you? Wasn't he great? And you were the guy who said Jack Russo couldn't act!"

St. Clair stared at them, then, involuntarily, his finger pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked harmlessly on the empty chamber.

Still grinning, Lyons swept past him into the apartment. "Jack?" he called. "Where are you?"



Legend has it that a henpecked husband had chiseled on the tombstone of a domineering wife, the epitaph: SHE IS AT PEACE AND SO AM I. The words are echoed in the hearts of many, and on the tongues of a few brave men.



THE NEW bread man asked, "How many loaves do you usually take, Mr. Jones?"

Before Henry Jones could reply, his fat wife bustled from the rear of the grocery store and said, "Another new man on the bread truck? What's the matter with your company, they can't keep a man on this route?"

"He asked for a transfer," the bread man said. He turned back to

Jones. "How many did you say, Mr. Jones?"

Hazel Jones said testily, "I do the ordering around here, mister. Henry, go mark those soup cans like I told you. How many times I got to tell you to do something before it gets done?" Returning her attention to the bread man, she said, "Two dozen. And be sure you take the old ones out. Don't let me catch you putting the stale ones on top, and don't try giving me stale loaves you took out of some other store. You hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," the bread man said in a pained voice.

Picking the four remaining loaves of yesterday's bread from the bakery shelf, the man carried them out to his truck. At a glare from his wife, Henry Jones scurried over to the canned-goods section, picked up a stamp pad and price stamp and began stamping price marks on soup cans.

Delivery men all asked for transfers to some other route after a month or two of dealing with his virago of a wife, Henry thought. It was too bad husbands couldn't ask for transfers. Twenty years of being treated like a stock boy, doing all the menial work, while Hazel strutted importantly around giving orders. If she actually did something, it wouldn't be so bad, he thought. But she wouldn't even

wait on customers. She was the executive type, good only for telling other people what to do.

If she only knew what was in store for her tonight, he thought with grim satisfaction, viciously slamming the ink stamp onto the top of a can. It would shock her speechless to realize even the lowliest worm can turn.

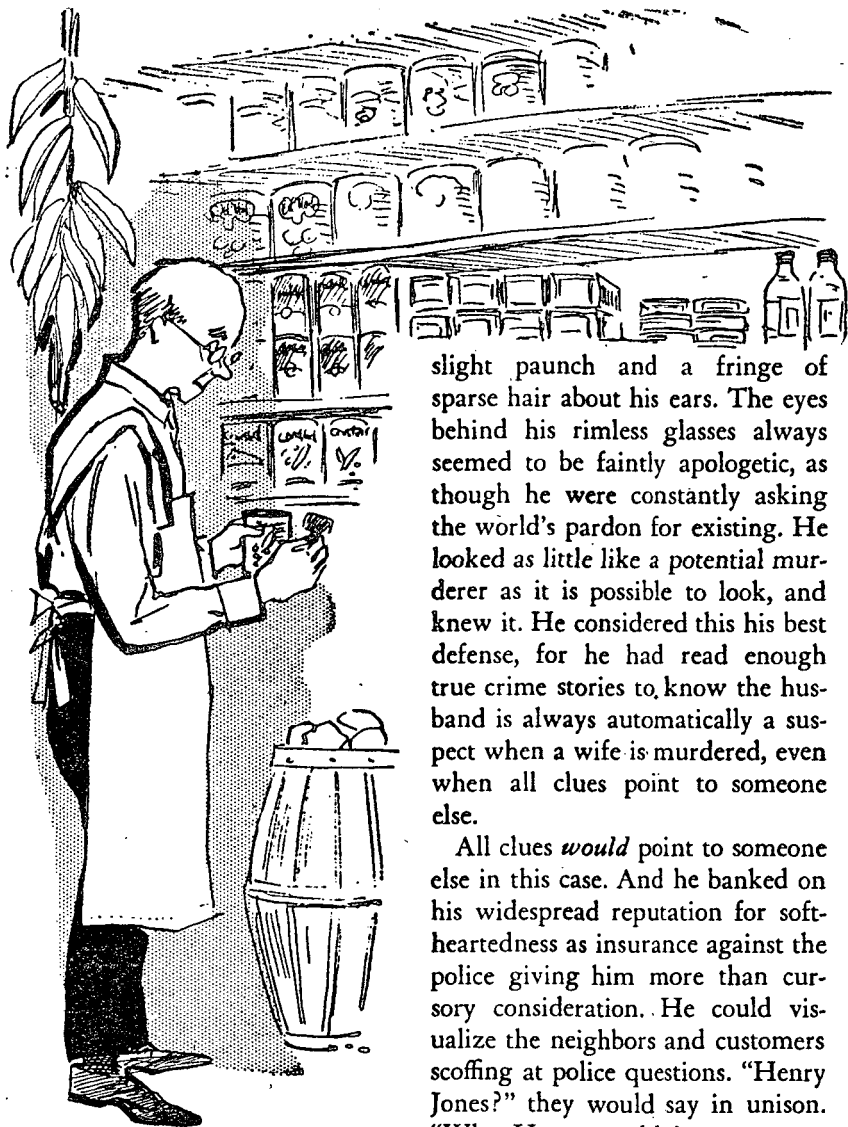
The bread man returned carrying a double armload of loaves. He stacked them on the empty shelf to the accompaniment of a steady tirade of criticism of the bakery's service, the quality of its product and its unreasonable prices. When he finished, he silently handed Hazel the slip to sign and went out without saying good-bye.

He would be asking for a different route in a week, Henry thought. Then he paused with the stamp upraised and mentally corrected himself. The man wouldn't ask for a transfer at all, because after today he wouldn't ever have to deal with Hazel again.

Behind him Hazel's rasping voice said; "You posing for a statue, bonehead? Hurry up and get that marking done. We need soap powder from the stock room."

With a spastic movement Henry brought the stamp down on the can it was poised over.

Henry Jones was a mild looking little man in his late forties with a



slight paunch and a fringe of sparse hair about his ears. The eyes behind his rimless glasses always seemed to be faintly apologetic, as though he were constantly asking the world's pardon for existing. He looked as little like a potential murderer as it is possible to look, and knew it. He considered this his best defense, for he had read enough true crime stories to know the husband is always automatically a suspect when a wife is murdered, even when all clues point to someone else.

All clues *would* point to someone else in this case. And he banked on his widespread reputation for soft-heartedness as insurance against the police giving him more than cursory consideration. He could visualize the neighbors and customers scoffing at police questions. "Henry Jones?" they would say in unison. "Why, Henry wouldn't swat a mosquito he caught in the act of biting him."

The neatest thing about it was that the police would find no one anywhere to negate the neighborhood picture of him as a softhearted man, because he really was one. With the exception of human beings, there wasn't a living thing Henry could have brought himself to hurt. Up to now there had never been an occasion where it was necessary for him to express his poor opinion of the human race. Even now he wouldn't have dreamed of harming Hazel if there were any other solution. But he had exhausted all alternate plans. He suspected that if he suggested divorce, Hazel would kill *him*. Running away and changing his identity meant losing his beloved store. The only other alternative, that of continuing to put up with her domineering after twenty years of subservience, was unthinkable. Henry had had it.

It was to be that night.

Jones' Grocery Store stayed open until nine nightly six days a week in order to compete with the chain stores, which closed at six. The routine at closing time was always the same. Henry would follow the last customer to the door and lock it after him in deference to Hazel's chronic fear of holdup men. Then, as Hazel counted the money and, in this case, a Saturday night, bagged the week's receipts in

a night-deposit bag, Henry covered the vegetables and, if it didn't look like rain, carried the trash can out to empty into the burner, so that it would be ready for a match in the morning.

Tonight Henry deliberately departed from routine. When the last customer, Mrs. Hoffman from up the street, left the store, he pretended to be busy rearranging the contents of a shelf until she was out of sight. This was important to his plan because he couldn't afford to have the last customer testify that he had locked the door behind her.

Hazel called, "What's the matter, you don't lock the door, bonehead? You want some holdup man to walk in while we're all alone and take our money?"

"Sorry," Henry muttered. Hurrying over, he locked the door and dropped the keys in his pocket.

A moment later he departed from routine again by starting out back with the trash can before covering the vegetables.

"You in a trance or something?" Hazel yelled after him. "You never covered the vegetables."

Henry didn't have time to cover the vegetable bins. The chore usually took a good ten minutes, and he wanted to act as soon after Mrs. Hoffman's departure as feasible.

He said in an apologetic tone, "As soon as I come back in, Hazel.

It doesn't make any difference which I do first, so long as it gets done, does it?"

"Well, just don't forget," Hazel said irritably.

Just outside the back door Henry set down the trash can and opened the lid of one of a number of cardboard boxes piled against the rear of the store. Groping inside, he drew out the nickel-plated hammerless revolver he had bought in a pawnshop six months before and thrust it into his belt under his apron. He reached inside again and drew out a small pinch bar. He picked up the trash can, one hand holding both a side of the can and the pinch bar, and carried it to the incinerator near the back fence at a rapid trot. Quickly dumping it, he set down the can, pushed open the rear gate and stepped into the alley.

The only light back here came from a green-shaded bulb over the store's rear door, which cast a circle of light on the ground only about fifteen feet across. The reflected glow from this was just enough to make for bare visibility in the alley. It was sufficient for Henry to make out the broad metal disk imbedded in the alley's center.

Kneeling, he used the pinch bar to pry up one side of the manhole cover. Getting his fingers under it, he dragged it partially off the man-

hole, just enough to leave an opening about six inches wide. He dropped the pinch bar through the hole and, after a moment, heard a satisfying splash some distance below.

Uttering a silent prayer that no automobile would drive up the alley during the next few minutes and wreck both itself and his plans by dropping a wheel into the manhole, he pushed back through the gate, picked up the trash can and hurried back into the store.

As he set the can down in its accustomed place, Hazel said, "You took long enough. You been walking around in a daze all day."

She had finished bagging the money and the night-deposit bag lay next to the register. Glancing through the front windows at the street, Henry saw that no one was in sight.

"Did any customers try to get in while I was outside?" he inquired, and held his breath for the answer. If some late-arriving customer had tried the locked door, all plans would have to be off for tonight. He couldn't afford having a possible witness who could testify that Hazel had still been alive after the door was locked.

"You crazy?" Hazel said. "Everybody knows we close at nine."

Henry went over to the door, took the keys from his pocket and

unlocked it. He pocketed the keys again.

"You in your second childhood?" Hazel yelled at him. "You think it's morning, we should be opening up already?"

Henry made no reply. Walking toward her until only the counter separated them, he drew the nickel-plated gun from under his apron. Hazel's eyes widened in shocked disbelief when he pointed it at her.

Henry shot her in the chest three times.

Hazel's body had hardly hit the floor when he was racing behind the counter. Thrusting the nickel-plated gun into his hip pocket, he jerked open the drawer in the counter immediately beneath the cash register and drew out a blue-steel thirty-eight revolver. Kneeling, he grasped the dead woman's right wrist, placed the gun in her hand and curled her fingers around the stock. Then he pulled it from her hand again, closed his own fingers around the butt and rose to his feet. The whole operation took no more than thirty seconds.

A glance through the front windows told him the street was still deserted. But he knew it wouldn't be within thirty more seconds. In this quiet neighborhood the blast of pistol shots would bring curious neighbors to investigate from all directions.

Sweeping the night-deposit bag into his left hand, Henry sped for the rear door and outside. He made the back gate at a dead run, slammed through it and stooped over the manhole. The night-deposit bag went in first, then the nickel-plated gun. With his heel he pushed the manhole cover back into place.

Straightening, he aimed the blue-barreled pistol down the alley in the direction of the street and fired two spaced shots. Then he turned and slowly plodded back inside.

When he re-entered the store, elderly Tom Bower, who lived in one of the apartments next door, was leaning over the counter staring down in horror at Hazel. Mrs. Caskin, from the apartment house on the other side of the store, was just coming in. Behind her other neighbors were converging from all directions.

Henry said in a deliberately dull voice, "I think I hit him, but he got away."

Bower gulped and looked at the gun in Henry's hand.

Seeing that the old man hadn't comprehended what he said, Henry made it clearer. By now Mrs. Caskin and several other neighbors were in the store, and he spoke for their collective benefit.

"It was a holdup man, Mr. Bower. I forgot to lock the front door

and he got in while I was out back emptying the trash. When I came back in, he was pointing a gun at Hazel. He turned to cover me and ordered me behind the counter with Hazel. When he turned his head, Hazel jerked open the drawer beneath the register, where we keep a gun." He held up the gun in his hand. "This one. When she pulled it out, he shot her. Then he picked up the money bag and ran out the back way. Hazel had dropped the gun on the floor. I grabbed it up and chased him. I shot at him twice while he was running down the alley, and I think the second shot hit him, because he staggered. But he kept running and disappeared around the corner toward Grand Avenue."

A dozen people had crowded into the store by the time he finished the explanation. Those who had arrived too late to catch the first part of it asked earlier arrivals what it was all about. The babble of low-toned voices kept increasing as the first to arrive repeated the story and it was relayed on to others still coming in.

Mrs. Caskin moved behind the counter and knelt over Hazel. Rising, she said in an awed voice, "I think she's dead."

Setting his pistol on the counter, Henry leaned over to look down at Hazel. Then he let his shoulders

slump and buried his face in his hands.

There was a moment of silence before someone said awkwardly, "Maybe we better call a doctor. And the police."

One of the neighbors went after old Doc Mauser, who was only a block away over on Eichelberger. The doctor got there at the same time a one-man radio car arrived with a uniformed officer driving it. There was nothing Dr. Mauser could do for Hazel, except pronounce her dead, so he turned his attention to the bereaved widower. Henry had managed to work up a pretty convincing state of shock, only half simulated. The doctor gave him a tranquilizer.

By the time Henry had swallowed his tranquilizer, the uniformed policeman had managed to sort out the simultaneous explanations thrown at him by a dozen neighbors. He asked Henry for a description of the bandit. This was easy, because Henry had been memorizing a description for months.

"He was big," Henry said in a low, grief-crushed voice. "Six one, I'd say, and maybe two hundred pounds. I'd guess he was around thirty-five years old. He was wearing a brown felt hat, a tan jacket and brown slacks. He had a swarthy complexion, a big, hooked nose,

dark hair and there was something wrong with his left eye. The lid drooped lower than the right one. There was a black mole on his right cheek with hair growing out of it and a red scar running from his left ear clear down to the corner of his mouth. It made that side of his mouth kind of pucker up."

The policeman looked impressed by this detailed description. He went out to his car to call it in over his radio and have a dragnet thrown around the area.

When he returned, he contented himself with making a list of everyone present, including the corpse. He didn't ask Henry anything else, seeming to feel that in his upset state it was better to leave the principal witness to the experienced hands of the Homicide Squad.

A Sergeant Harry Newton from Homicide showed up about a quarter of ten. He was a stolid, square-faced man of middle age with deceptively sleepy eyes, which never missed a thing. He had with him a thin, lanky man in civilian clothes who carried a laboratory kit and a flash camera. Sergeant Newton addressed the man as Mac, and Henry got the impression he was a civilian employee of the police lab.

Meantime an ambulance from City Hospital had arrived and was standing by to take Hazel to the

morgue when the homicide officer released her body.

Sergeant Newton first listened to the uniformed officer's account of what had happened. After a bare glance at Henry, now seated in a chair someone had thoughtfully brought from the back room, he turned to Dr. Mauser.

"What's the dope, Doc?" he inquired.

"There's almost no bleeding, Sergeant, so she must have died instantly. Any of the three bullets could have done it. All three hit her directly in the heart."

The sergeant glanced around. "Any of you people know anything you haven't told the officer here?"

When no one said anything, he asked, "Which one of you was first on the scene?"

"I was," old Tom Bower told him.

"Okay," the sergeant said. "What's your story?"

Bower explained that he lived in a downstairs apartment next door and had been sitting in his front room, which had its windows open because of the warmth of the night. He said that when he heard the shots, he knew instantly they were gunshots and not merely backfires.

"How come?" Newton asked.

"Well, they sounded like they

came from inside. I don't know how I knew, because the way they sounded, you couldn't tell what direction they came from. But I was sure they came from over here. Right away I thought of a holdup and I came running."

The sergeant thoughtfully tugged at an earlobe. "Why'd you think of a holdup?"

"Mrs. Jones was always afraid the store would be held up some night. Lots of times when I was the last customer out, she'd yell for Henry to lock the front door when I was only halfway to it. If he didn't move sharp, she'd make some crack like did he want a hold-up man to walk in on them alone and take their money. I knew she kept that gun in the drawer under the register, and what I really thought was that she'd blasted some bandit. Didn't even occur to me he'd blasted her. If it had, I wouldn't of been in such a hurry to get over here."

Sergeant Newton emitted a non-committal grunt.

"The front door was unlocked when I got here," Bower continued. "I couldn't see anybody inside, so I come on in. When I got to the counter, I seen Mrs. Jones lying on the floor behind it. About then a couple of more shots sounded out back and a minute later Henry come in by the back door with a

gun in his hand. He told me what happened."

The sergeant looked around at the circle of faces, but no one had any further details to offer. To his general inquiry as to what time the shots had been heard, the consensus was that the first three had sounded about five after nine, the ones in the alley only about a minute later.

"You got all these people's names and addresses?" Newton asked the man in uniform.

"Sure, Sarge."

"Then all of you please clear out of here," the homicide officer directed. "Give us some room to work. You can leave too, Doc."

Reluctantly the assemblage drifted outside. But no one, with the sole exception of Dr. Mauser, went home. The rest stood on the sidewalk watching the goings on inside through the front windows.

At Sergeant Newton's direction the thin man named Mac snapped pictures of the corpse from several angles. Then Newton told him to dust the gun for prints.

All this time Henry had been sitting dully in his chair, apparently paying little attention to what was going on around him. Now he roused himself.

"Why do you want to check that gun for fingerprints?" he inquired. "It isn't the one the holdup man

used. That's ours—the one Hazel kept in the drawer."

"Just covering all bets," the sergeant said laconically.

After carefully dusting the gun with a silver-colored powder, the lab man used inch-wide Scotch tape to lift the fingerprints which appeared. When he had fixed the tape to some white cards, he had a permanent record of the prints.

"Take his prints," Newton said, pointing at Henry. "Then the dead woman's."

Laying an ink pad on the counter, the lab man motioned Henry over. Henry put a puzzled expression on his face, but he made no objection. Docilely he allowed his fingers one-at-a-time to be rolled over the pad, then gently rolled over a white card.

When the process was completed, Sergeant Newton asked, "Got any place to wash up here?"

"Upstairs," Henry said. "Our apartment is right over the store."

The sergeant permitted him to go upstairs to wash the ink from his hands while Hazel was being fingerprinted. When he returned, the lab man was comparing the two sets of prints with the ones he had lifted from the gun.

"Checks out," he said to the homicide officer. "A clear set of his superimposed over hers. Hers are mostly smudged, but a couple of

partials are good enough for comparison purposes."

Henry was thankful that he had taken the precaution of closing Hazel's hand around the pistol grip. While he hadn't been sure the gun would even be checked for fingerprints, he had read enough not to want to risk the lack of Hazel's prints on the stock.

Sergeant Newton said, "Stick that gun in your kit to take back to ballistics, Mac." Then he said to the man in uniform, "Tell those guys out front they can have the body now."

As the policeman went out to relay this message to the ambulance attendants, Newton finally turned his attention to Henry.

For the next twenty minutes Henry repeated his story, answered questions, re-described the bandit and, finally, went out back with the sergeant to show him exactly where he had been standing when he fired at the fleeing robber and just where the man had been when he staggered as though hit.

Back inside again Henry noted that Hazel's body was now gone and that the ambulance was missing from in front. The crowd on the sidewalk still lingered, however.

Sergeant Newton asked, "How much money did he get?"

"The duplicate deposit slip should be in the register," Henry

said. "It was quite a lot because it was a full week's receipts. We make a night deposit on Saturday night, you see, so that money isn't lying around over the weekend. Do you think he may have been watching the place for some time, and knew the most money would be here on Saturday night?"

"He probably had the job cased," Newton agreed.

Walking behind the counter, carefully avoiding stepping where Hazel's body had lain, Henry opened the register and lifted out the duplicate deposit slip Hazel had left there. He winced slightly when he saw the total. It was a lot of money to have thrown down a hole, but he hadn't dared risk hiding it somewhere. He had decided in advance to leave no loose ends whatever lying around for him to trip over accidentally. It was this planning which had made him pick Saturday night for the crime, despite the cost involved. Having a logical mind himself, it had seemed to him more plausible for a professional holdup man to strike at a time when the take would be greatest.

"Fourteen hundred and twenty-eight dollars and seventeen cents," he said in a low voice. "Let's see. There's three—almost four hundred in checks, which I suppose I can get people to stop payment on. But

it's still over a thousand in cash."

"Describe the bag."

"It was a regular night-deposit bag," Henry said. "With Security National stamped on its side. The keys to the bag and the night vault must be in Hazel's pocket. I always drove her over and waited in the car while she made the deposit."

Sergeant Newton was silent for a moment, apparently going over all the testimony in his mind and mentally checking to see if there were any questions he had missed. Presently he glanced about the store.

"Where's the empty trash can you were carrying when you came in from out back?" he inquired.

Henry pointed to where it stood against the wall over by the meat counter.

Newton's sleepy-looking eyes drooped half shut. "How'd it get way over there? That's halfway across the store from the back door and also from the register. When he ordered you behind the counter with your wife, did you carry the trash can clear over there first?"

Henry's stomach gave a lurch. Thinking furiously, he said, "I—I guess I just reacted automatically. For so many years I've been carrying that empty can in the back door and setting it down in the same place, I went right ahead and carried it over where it belonged

when he pointed the gun at me and told me to put it down. That's when Hazel made her break. He had to turn half away from her in order to keep me covered."

This explanation seemed to satisfy the sergeant, for he didn't pursue the matter. Turning to the uniformed policeman, who was still standing by, he said, "Get on your radio and find out if the dragnet has pulled anything in. If it hasn't, have a half dozen officers report to me here. I want that alley scoured for the two bullets Mr. Jones fired."

He returned his attention to Henry. "I guess that's all we can do here tonight, Mr. Jones. As soon as my assistants get here and I set them to work, you can lock up and we'll go down to headquarters."

"Headquarters?" Henry repeated, his stomach lurching again. "What for?"

"Want you to look at some pictures," the sergeant said mildly.

Relief flooded over Henry. For one terrible moment he had thought he was under arrest.

It was well past midnight before Henry got back from downtown. In the interim he had looked at hundreds of mug shots of men with records of armed robbery. He had identified none, of course. To make it look good, though, he had hesitated over one or two before

finally moving his head in definite negatives.

Sergeant Newton drove him home and told him he would get in touch with him as soon as there were any developments.

On Sunday Henry phoned a funeral director to make arrangements for Hazel's interment. When he explained the circumstances of his wife's death and that her body was presently at the city morgue, the mortician told him that a date couldn't be set until they learned when the morgue planned to release the body. He told Henry not to worry about it, however, as he would contact the morgue himself and let Henry know.

In the middle of the night it started to rain. When Henry arose Monday morning it was coming down in such solid sheets, he could barely see the other side of the street from his front-room windows. A river of water gushed along the gutter out front, piling up at the intersection to form a small lake because the curb sewer slots there couldn't drain it off fast enough.

Just as Henry finished breakfast Sergeant Harry Newton dropped in. The detective wore a raincoat and rubbers, but they hadn't been adequate protection against the deluge. When he shed his rubbers and raincoat in the upstairs hall, the

lower legs of his trousers were soaked through and his shoes sloshed when he walked.

"Want to dry your trousers and shoes over the kitchen range?" Henry asked solicitously. "I'll loan you a robe while they're drying."

The homicide officer shook his head. "They'd only get wet again when I went back outside. This is going to last all day."

Sloshing into the front room, he carefully seated himself on the sofa so that the damp lower part of his trousers didn't touch the upholstery.

At first it appeared to Henry that the only purpose of the man's visit was to brief him on developments. He told Henry that the three bullets recovered from Hazel's body were all good enough specimens so that ballistics would readily be able to identify the murder weapon if it ever turned up. He added casually that they hadn't been fired from the gun Henry had used, and weren't even the same caliber, as the murder weapon had been a thirty-two instead of a thirty-eight.

"We recovered one of the bullets you fired from a telegraph pole in the alley," the sergeant went on. "We couldn't find the other, so maybe you did wing the guy. We've issued his description to all area doctors, in case he tries to get a wound patched up. I spent yester-

day talking to a lot of your neighbors."

"Oh?" Henry said, a trifle confused by the abrupt switch of subject.

"Uh-huh. Seems to be general knowledge that your wife was kind of a shrew. Always on your back. Nobody thinks you'll grieve over her very long."

Flushing, Henry said nothing.

"On the other hand, everybody says you're the most softhearted guy in the world, that you wouldn't even set a trap for a mouse. Let alone kill a human."

Henry felt his stomach turn over. In a faint voice he said, "You mean—you mean—" and couldn't get any more out.

"I mean we haven't swallowed your story whole," Newton finished for him. "Not that you're under more than routine suspicion. We always automatically suspect the husband when a wife is murdered."

"But in a case like this!" Henry protested.

"It wouldn't be the first time a guy rigged a robbery to cover uxoricide. That's wife-murderer, in case you don't know the word. We haven't got any concrete evidence that you did, but there are a couple of angles we don't like."

"What?" Henry managed.

"One is your description of the

bandit. You must have a photographic mind, it's so complete. I'm not saying you made him up. All I'm saying is you might have. It's the sort of description an amateur murderer might dream up, thinking the more complete it was, the more convincing it would be. Another thing is the location of that trash basket. Maybe things happened like you say, but it's hard to imagine a bandit letting you walk clear across the store like that. Seems more likely he would have ordered you to drop it right where you were and get behind the counter with your wife."

"It's the way it happened," Henry insisted, sweating.

"We can't prove it didn't, Mr. Jones. The thing I have most trouble swallowing is your chasing the guy and shooting at him. Doesn't seem in character for a mild guy like you."

Henry said faintly, "He'd—he'd just shot my wife. I guess I saw red."

"Maybe," the sergeant conceded. "People do odd things under stress. But I have to ask you this question, because it's part of our routine. Did you kill your wife and rig this robbery?"

"Of course not," Henry said with forced indignance.

"Well, if you did, you'll probably get away with it," Newton said.

Henry stared at the man in fascination. The homicide officer stared back at him speculatively.

"Why do you say that?" Henry finally got out.

"What can we prove? You've got a pretty good story. And if it was rigged, you did a thorough job. Even down to such details as your wife's prints being on that gun under yours. I imagine you'd be smart enough to dispose of the other gun and money bag so we'd never find them. We looked, of course. We sifted every ashpit, garbage can and trash can in that alley. If you did kill her, we'd never prove it in a million years, unless we got a confession."

As Henry stared at him numbly, Sergeant Newton said, "This is just routine suspicion, of course. It doesn't mean I think you killed her. It just means I think you might have. I hope I haven't upset you. As I said before, we always consider the husband as a possibility."

With that he rose, bid Henry a laconic good-bye and sloshed out into the hall to put back on his dripping raincoat and useless rubbers. It was a half hour after he left before Henry stopped shaking.

During the next two nights he had trouble sleeping. Partly this was because the rain continued to come down in torrents and its

steady beating on the roof disturbed him. But mostly it was because he kept visualizing being dragged down to headquarters and questioned for hours on end with a white light in his face. He wondered if the local police employed rubber hoses to make suspects talk.

But when he heard nothing further from Sergeant Newton, his alarm gradually subsided. It *had* been just routine suspicion, he decided, and the sergeant merely had an unsettling way of expressing himself.

For several reasons Henry didn't open the store during this time. For one thing he felt a period of mourning would be expected of him. For another, funeral arrangements and the funeral itself took up so much time. For a third, there would have been little business anyway because the torrential rain kept everyone indoors except those who had vital errands.

Fortunately Henry's basement was so well sealed, he only got dribbles of water in it. But according to news reports, many basements were flooded to the rafters. The city streets became shallow rivers, with water reaching to the hubcaps of the few automobiles whose drivers were brave enough to venture onto them. The mayor declared a state of emergency and

business came to a virtual standstill as the city waited for the downpour to stop.

It stopped abruptly on Wednesday morning and the sun came out hot and bright. By noon the overtaxed sewers had drained away the surface water and the streets were steaming moisture.

Hazel's funeral had been tentatively scheduled for Wednesday afternoon, depending on the weather. With the streets now unflooded, it took place as scheduled. Henry managed to look appropriately sad during the service.

By Thursday morning the sun had baked the streets dry and the only evidence of the fifty-five-hour deluge was a few rapidly evaporating puddles on lawns where there were low spots. Henry engaged young Thad Bower, Tom Bower's grandson, to help out as a combination clerk and stock boy, and opened for business.

He still had heard nothing more from the police.

Friday morning, when Henry went out back to set a match to the trash deposited in the incinerator the night before, he found a truck marked *Department of Streets and Sewers* parked in the alley. A tall, lean man wearing hip boots and a cap with a miner's lamp on it was prying up the manhole cover with a crowbar. A stolid, middle-aged

man in a rumpled brown suit stood watching him. Henry's heart began to thump when he recognized the latter as Sergeant Harry Newton.

Henry forgot the incinerator. Pushing open the gate, he stepped into the alley.

The homicide officer glanced at him with sleepy eyes. "Morning," he said in an unnaturally husky voice.

Henry said, "What—what's going on?"

Sergeant Newton drew out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "Had a cold all week," he said hoarsely. "Guess I should have dried out my shoes like you suggested. Just making a routine check."

"On what?"

The sergeant blew his nose again, put the handkerchief away. "Fellow named Lischer came in to make a report last night. Seems he drove up this alley the night your wife was killed. His headlights hit this manhole just in time to save him from running a wheel into it. He says it was part way open. He managed to swerve enough to straddle it, and he drove on with his heart in his mouth. He only lives over on Delor, a couple of blocks from here. He was pulling into his garage when it occurred to him he should have stopped and shoved the cover back in place so

nobody else would wreck a car. So he backed out again and drove back here. He says he was back within ten minutes, but by then somebody had replaced the cover. He figures he arrived the second time about a quarter after nine. He didn't hear any shots either time he drove through the alley, so all the shooting must have taken place between his two trips. He drove back home again and forgot about it until he read about the robbery-murder."

Henry didn't say anything. He was watching the man in hip boots, who now had the cover off and was placing a circular metal guard rail around the open hole. When this was in place, the man drew a garden rake from the rear of the truck and descended into the hole.

Sergeant Newton said, "When Lischer read about the murder, he got to thinking about the open manhole and wondered if there was any connection. He wasn't sure your store was in the same block as the manhole, though, so he decided to drive over and take a look before saying anything. But the rain kept him indoors the first part of the week. Like a lot of people, he didn't even make it to work. And Wednesday he just didn't get around to it. On his way home from work yesterday he drove past your store, then around into the al-



ley. When he saw the manhole was directly behind your place, he came in and told us about it."

Henry swallowed a couple of times before managing, "What do you suppose it means, Sergeant?"

The homicide officer shrugged. "With all the water that's been rushing through the sewers since that night, anything dropped down there has probably been washed for blocks. There's twenty blocks of sewer pipe between here and the River Des Peres. But there's also ten manholes. A Department-of-

Streets-and-Sewers worker is climbing into each of those holes with a rake right now. Whatever's down there, we'll find."

Henry felt ill. He said, "I'd better get back to the store. I've got a brand new clerk I don't like to leave alone."

He pushed back through the gate, forgetting to set a match to the trash as he passed the incinerator. Inside he collapsed into a chair in the back room and stared helplessly into space.

Ten minutes later young Thad Bower came back hunting for him to ask the price of potatoes. Rousing himself, Henry accompanied the boy out front and took over the waiting-on of the customer himself.

For the rest of the morning Henry functioned automatically, his lips smiling at customers but his insides churning. Every time there was a lull in business, he went to the back room to glance out at the alley. The city truck was still parked there.

At noon Henry sent his new clerk home to lunch. Ten minutes later Sergeant Harry Newton came in the back door. Henry's heart rose to his throat when he saw what the sergeant carried. In one hand he held a small pinch bar, in the other a nickel-plated revolver with spots of rust on it.

"We found this a block away," the homicide officer said, hefting the pinch bar. "The gun was two blocks away. They could both have been dropped through the man-hole out back and carried that far by the rushing water."

Henry gulped.

"The other guys didn't find a thing," the sergeant said. "Or at least nothing we can connect to the robbery. They turned up a lot of miscellaneous junk ranging from flashlight batteries to a set of tire chains. I was hoping we'd find that night-deposit bag, but it must have washed clear to the river."

"Why did you expect that to be in the sewer?" Henry asked in a squeaky voice.

"Seems obvious what happened," the sergeant said. "Or at least two alternatives are obvious. The first is that the bandit opened the man-hole just before he pulled the job, so that he'd have a place to dump the bag after removing the money. He'd know about the bag, if he had the job properly cased, and he'd want to get rid of incriminating evidence as soon as possible. After using the gun, he'd want to get rid of that too. So it could be that when he ran out back, he cut open the bag with a pocket knife—he'd have to cut it because it was locked and the keys were in your wife's pocket—took out the money and dumped

the bag and checks down the sewer along with the gun. He'd have time to do that and kick the cover back in place while you were scrambling around for the gun your wife dropped. Maybe that's what delayed him enough for you to get a couple of shots at him. If we had found the cut bag, it would tend to support that alternative."

"I see," Henry said, afraid to ask what the other alternative was.

Sergeant Newton told him anyway. "Then it could be that there never was a bandit, that you rigged the whole thing and dropped the murder weapon and the bag down the hole yourself. If we'd found the bag uncut and with the money still in it, we'd know you rigged it."

Henry managed to ask in a relatively steady voice, "Which do you think happened?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Without the bag showing, it could be either way. This may not even be the murder weapon of course. But if ballistics says it is, we can probably trace the gun."

"How?" Henry asked, relatively secure on that point because he had given the pawnbroker a fake name when he purchased the gun six months before.

"We'll send the serial number to the manufacturer and get its original retail outlet. The outlet will

have the name of the original purchaser recorded, and we'll let him explain what he did with it. We've traced guns through a half dozen different owners that way. We won't even have to go to all that trouble if it turns out the gun was bought in some local pawnshop."

"Oh? Why not?"

"It'll be registered at headquarters. A city ordinance requires pawnbrokers to report the purchase and sale of all small arms."

Henry's feeling of security began to evaporate.

"If the gun came from a pawnbroker, it will be a snap," the sergeant went on. "Even if it was bought under an assumed name. Pawnbrokers have a remarkable memory for faces. Particularly for the faces of gun buyers, because they get questioned about them so often. We'll give him a description of the bandit and show you to him. He should be able to tell us which of you bought it."

Henry was unable to make any comment whatever. He just stood there numbly.

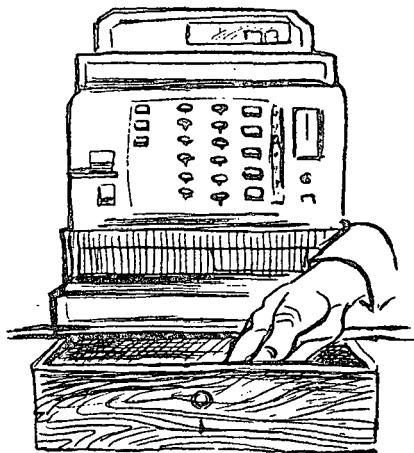
Sergeant Newton didn't appear to notice Henry's reaction. With a final remark that he would keep Henry informed of any developments, he left by the same way he had entered.

When the back door closed, Henry started doing some furious

thinking. Fortunately no customers came in during the next few minutes, so he was able to devote his full attention to the problem. The solution came to him quite suddenly.

The police still had possession of the thirty-eight revolver which Hazel had kept in the drawer beneath the cash register, but there was still a box of thirty-eight-caliber shells in the drawer. Henry pocketed six.

When Thad Bower returned from lunch at one P.M., Henry announced that he would now take his lunch break, added that he planned to take a brief nap after eating and requested the boy not to disturb him during the next hour.



"If you don't know the price of something, make a guess," he said. "Don't be running upstairs to wake me every five minutes."

"Yes, sir," the boy said. "I'll manage all right."

Henry went up the front stairs, walked through the apartment and quietly descended the back stairs. He eased his car from the garage into the alley and let it roll backward to the side street.

Twenty minutes later he parked in front of a pawnshop on Franklin Avenue.

It was a little cubbyhole of a place, and no one was in it but the same bent and wizened old man who had sold him the thirty-two six months before.

When Henry asked, "Do you have any thirty-eight-caliber handguns?" the old man peered at him, with a flicker of recognition.

"Didn't you buy a gun here once before?" he asked.

The question dispelled any doubts Henry may have had about what had to be done. It was also reassuring to his conscience that the man was so old and looked vaguely ill. He told himself that it would be a blessing to the old man to be put out of his misery.

"I was in a few months back," Henry said in a steady voice.

The pawnbroker unlocked a case beneath the counter and brought

out a thirty-eight police special. Handing it to Henry, he said, "Here's a fine buy. Hardly been fired and not a spot of rust on it."

Breaking open the cylinder, Henry peered down the barrel. Then he drew the six shells from his pocket and thumbed them into the cylinder one at a time, keeping his eyes fixed on the old man as he performed the operation. The pawnbroker's expression grew increasingly worried. He started to open his mouth, then closed it again when Henry clicked the cylinder back into place and pointed the gun at him.

"Get into the back room," Henry ordered.

"The money's in the cage," the old man said, nodding toward a steel-latticed cage at the end of the counter.

"Get into the back room," Henry repeated.

Shrugging, the pawnbroker came from behind the counter and shuffled through the open door to the back room. Following, Henry closed the door behind him.

When the old man turned around with an inquiring look on his face, Henry pressed the gun muzzle against his heart and fired.

The muzzle being directly against the man's body muffled the explosion to a dull roar, loud enough in the small room to make

Henry wince, but hardly loud enough to carry through two closed doors to the street. Henry felt reasonably sure that it couldn't have been heard outdoors.

The old man fell on his back without a sound and lay there with



his mouth open and an expression of indignant surprise on his face.

Whipping out a handkerchief, Henry rapidly wiped off the gun. Kneeling, he wrapped the dead man's fingers around the stock.

The front room was still empty when he peeped out. Carefully he wiped both knobs of the back room door and pulled the door shut behind him with his handkerchief over the knob. He used his handkerchief again to open the street door, paused to glance up and down the street, then wiped the outer handle before letting the door click shut behind him.

The only person on the street was a man on the other side looking into another pawnshop window with his back to Henry. Climbing into his car, Henry drove away.

Twenty minutes later he eased his car back into the garage, crossed the rear yard and quietly climbed the rear stairs. It was five minutes until two.

In lieu of lunch he drank two glasses of cold milk from the refrigerator, descended the front stairs and re-entered the store at exactly two P.M.

"Everything went fine," young Thad told him. "I'm catching on pretty good. Have your nap?"

"A little one," Henry said. "Better get some canned peas from the

boom. We're running low on shelf."

Just before the nine-o'clock closing hour Sergeant Harry Newton phoned.

"That gun we fished out of the sewer was the murder weapon all right," he reported. "We traced it to a pawnshop on Franklin."

"Oh?" Henry said.

"It was registered as having been sold to a George Williams at a non-existent address up on the north side. Obviously a fake name, since the address was fake. But unfortunately we can't get a description of the buyer from the pawnbroker."

"Why not?"

"He committed suicide this afternoon. I'd be suspicious of the timing if circumstances didn't make it suicide for certain."

"What circumstances?"

"He used one of his own guns. Since they were kept in a locked case, unloaded, a killer could hardly have gotten at it. And he had a motive. A week ago he found out he had cancer and had only a mat-

ter of months to live. It would have been a pretty painful death."

Henry felt pleased. Actually he had performed the old man a favor.

"Anyway it brings us to a dead end," the sergeant said. "If you rigged your wife's death, I guess you get away with it."

"I'm getting a little tired of your implications, Sergeant," Henry said.

"I'm not very subtle," the sergeant admitted. "Sorry if I offended you. As I've said before, you were never under more than routine suspicion. There's still an A.P.B. out on your scar-faced bandit. If we net him, you'll hear from us. Otherwise I probably won't be talking to you again."

"I hope you catch him," Henry said a trifle stiffly. "Goodby, Sergeant."

Hanging up, he said to Thad Bower, "You can empty the trash while I check out the register." He tossed the boy his key ring. "Lock the front door first. We don't want any more bandits walking in to hold us up."



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